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**Károli**

Collection of Papers

# Influencing Beckett Beckett Influencing

Patrick Armstrong  
Enda Bates  
Linda Ben-Zvi  
Jonathan Bignell  
Llewellyn Brown  
Mariko Hori Tanaka  
Nicholas E. Johnson  
Márton Mesterházi  
Néill O'Dwyer  
Anita Rákóczy  
Teresa Rosell Nicolás  
Yoshiko Takebe  
Gábor Romhányi Török  
Laurens De Vos



Edited by:

Anita Rákóczy, Mariko Hori Tanaka, Nicholas E. Johnson



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# COLLECTION KÁROLI

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**INFLUENCING  
BECKETT / BECKETT  
INFLUENCING**

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EDITED BY  
ANITA RÁKÓCZY – MARIKO HORI TANAKA – NICHOLAS E. JOHNSON

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Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary  
Kálvin tér 9.

H-1091 Budapest, Hungary

T: (+36-1) 455-9060

Fax: (+36-1) 455-9062

L'Harmattan Kiadó  
Kossuth Lajos utca 14–16.  
H-1053 Budapest, Hungary

L'Harmattan France  
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## PREFACE

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LINDA BEN-ZVI

*Influencing Beckett / Beckett Influencing* celebrates two special events in international Beckett studies. The essays in this volume, originally presented in June 2017 at the Samuel Beckett Working Group meeting held at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary and organized by Professor Mariko Hori Tanaka, Dr. Anita Rákóczy, and myself, was the first International Beckett Conference ever held in Hungary. The Beckett Working Group — a part of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), the largest theatre organization in the world, now in its 63<sup>rd</sup> year — also marked its twenty-first anniversary. Begun in Israel in 1996, the year the IFTR's annual meeting was held at Tel Aviv University, it is now the second oldest of the twenty-three Working Groups in IFTR; it is also the only one dedicated to the work of one playwright, an indication of Beckett's unique standing in Theatre Studies, as his plays continue to be studied and performed in ever-increasing numbers thirty years after his death.

From its beginnings, the Beckett Working Group has been international, drawing participants from around the world. At that first meeting I convened, the eighteen present came from eight different countries. This mix of cultures, theatre histories, and performance styles enlivened our discussions and enriched the essays that resulted. From its inception, the group has also been comprised of both Beckett luminaries in the field, including Martin Esslin, author of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, and Ruby Cohn, one of the first and foremost Beckett scholars, as well as young doctoral and post-doctoral researchers attending a Beckett conference for the first time. Yet what was unique from the start was the egalitarian and open nature of our meetings and discussions, which encouraged established and new Beckett scholars to intermingle and share research and ideas on an equal footing, with none of that professional hierarchy that far too often shapes academic conferences and hinders younger participants from critiquing or questioning the research of established figures in the field.

For example, after twenty-one years, fourteen of which I chaired the group, I can still recall one young, post-doctorate woman at our first meeting presenting an original essay on Beckett's handling of women characters in his plays, using as her critical approach recent feminist theory. It was an approach



that a well-known, established scholar in our group mocked as being irrelevant to Beckett studies, but that the group, after considerable and sometimes heated but civil discussion, decided was a new, significant avenue into the study of Beckett's plays, one that should be explored and not dismissed out of hand.

Another feature of the Beckett Working group that set it apart from other academic meetings was its format. Traditionally, those wishing to participate in a conference submit abstracts and, if accepted, are placed on a panel of three or four people researching a similar subject. At the meeting itself, they are usually given 15–20 minutes to read their prepared essays; and at the end of the presentations, 15–25 minutes are reserved for audience comments and questions, although in practice since papers tend to run longer than planned, little time, if any, is left for discussion. That means someone may spend months researching and writing a paper, travel to a different city or even country, and then have a quarter of an hour to present their work and a few minutes, if they are lucky, to answer any questions or receive responses.

Not so in the Beckett Working Group. I believed that if we were true to our name, this would be a 'working' group, the papers presented often works-in-progress, and—most important—each would be given sufficient time for the group to express their reactions and suggest possible revisions or additions. To achieve this end, we put a cap of twenty on the number of participants and instituted a structure whereby the papers were sent to members of the group one month prior to our meeting, so that they could read and consider each essay carefully. When we met, instead of the presenter reading the entire essay, we allotted 10–15 minutes for each to present an oral (not written) summary of the main thesis and supporting ideas, leaving between 30–40 minutes for the group to interact with the writer and discuss each essay in depth.

This method, I am convinced, has led to the high quality of the essays that have emerged from our sessions and have appeared in the two prior volumes that the Beckett Working Group has published. *Drawing on Beckett: Portraits, Performances, and Cultural Contexts*<sup>1</sup> brought together twenty-one original essays by authors from eleven countries and presented for the first time in one volume twenty-four sketches of Samuel Beckett executed by his good friend, the Paris-based Israeli artist Avigdor Arikha. *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All*<sup>2</sup> emerged from the 2006 scholarly and creative outpouring around the world that marked the hundredth anniversary of Beckett's birth; the essays were gathered from the special Beckett Working Group chosen to be the central academic conference convened at Trinity College Dublin, Beckett's

<sup>1</sup> Linda Ben-Zvi (ed.): *Drawing on Beckett: Portraits, Performances, and Cultural Contexts*, Tel Aviv, Assaph Books, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Ben-Zvi – Angela Moorjani (eds.): *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All*, New York, Oxford University, 2008.

alma mater, as part of the University's centenary celebration. Of the forty-two participants, the essays of twenty-three were published in the volume, written by scholars from ten countries.

In this new collection, the essays written for the special, off-year conference in Budapest are in response to the organizers' Call for Papers that sought the widest possible range of subject matter and approaches suggested under the broad title *Beckett Influencing / Influencing Beckett*: "innumerable playwrights, novelists, philosophers, artists, composers, performers, film makers, and critical thinkers whose writings and creative life stimulated and inspired Beckett and echo through his writing," as well the ways in which "Beckett, too, has had a profound impact on his contemporaries and those who have followed him." In addition, the title allows essays to focus on two possible points of entry into Beckett's works: "back to those whose creative output, forms, ideas, and subject matter resonate in Beckett's oeuvre; forward to those who have found and continue to find inspiration in Beckett's works, particularly theatre." These guidelines are reflected in this volume.

The main goal of the publication, as it is of the Beckett Working Group and the collections that precede it, is to present and stimulate new ways of looking at Beckett's writing so that young researchers and theatre practitioners, as well as long-established scholars and artists, will be prompted to create their own studies and performances of his plays. It is our hope that the book will achieve this end. The IFTR regulations for working groups states: "Groups exist as long as they are useful, and then may stop meeting when goals are met or members are tired of their programs." As this rich and diversified collection of essays illustrates, Beckett scholars are neither tired nor finished. Like Beckett and his characters, we go on.



## INTRODUCTION

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Is Samuel Beckett an influencer? It depends on the year in which the question is asked. In 2018, Oxford Dictionaries added a new sense of the word “influencer” to its official lexicon: “a person with the ability to influence potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending the items on social media.” As Rebecca Juganaru notes, the recent explosion of use of this word (which has doubled since 2012, according to the Oxford corpus) is mostly attributable to this expanded usage, although the word’s historical meaning — “a person or thing that influences another” — dates to 1660.<sup>1</sup> The divergence between the word’s prior usage and its contemporary shift is interesting partly because of the question of agency: in the older and more general definition, all the activity can be on the part of the person receiving influence, rather than on the person wielding it. Beckett, for example, can be an “influencer” in the world theatre without intending to be; the mere fact of his writing, directing, and composing has changed the face of the theatre (and many other media besides) because artists are aware of, and altered by, his contributions. Without any attempted action beyond his own obedience to creative impulses, Beckett is now available as part of the vast cultural inheritance of the twentieth century to influence today’s artists, just as Democritus, Dante, and Descartes were available to him. Conversely, in the mediated spaces of digital culture where the new definition of “influencer” holds sway, all the power and urgency rests with the person “with the ability” to influence. Amusing as it is to think of Beckett on Instagram, offering fashion tips (“the Modernist,” as Dublin’s Brown Thomas department store catalogue called his look) or pithy reflections on life with an adjacent skull emoji, there is something horrifying in the idea of Beckett *attempting* to influence anyone, especially in the name of a product or service (even failure, for which he has regrettably become something of a poster-boy). As Harold Pinter wrote of Beckett to a friend in 1954: “He’s not selling anything I don’t

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Juganaru: The Increasing Influence of the Word “Influencer,” *Oxford Dictionaries Blog*, <https://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2018/05/09/the-increasing-influence-of-the-word-influencer/> (accessed 30 April 2019).

want to buy, he doesn't give a bollock whether I buy or not."<sup>2</sup> If Beckett offers influence today, it is an increasingly distant and passive transaction. Beckett is part of the theatrical architecture now, and this allows him to shape our experience, for the most part, without us noticing.

This volume reflects an attempt to notice nonetheless. It collects the vibrant recent scholarship of the Samuel Beckett Working Group under two broad headings: first, "Influencing Beckett," or the ongoing traces of how Beckett constructed his own work by drawing on artists and thinkers near and far, ancient and current; second, "Beckett Influencing," or how his work has unfolded into the contemporary world across genre, across media, and as a source for others' artworks. The third section, "Practitioner Voices," concerns the implementation of such patterns of influence in theatrical practice. This framing consciously echoes (and, we hope, augments) the distinction between "Debts and Legacies" that gave its name to a long-running seminar series (based at Oxford, 2005–2014), then to a special issue of *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* (2010) and a volume from Bloomsbury (2013). Reviewing the collections *Beckett after Beckett* (2006) and *Beckett's Dantes* (2005), Robert M. Kirschen observed that the books "in conjunction" could be said to "create a productive dialogue examining the concept of influence as it relates to the works of Samuel Beckett."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, there are few scholarly works of the past fifteen years in Beckett Studies of which this could not be said: the critical tradition, especially among anthologies of criticism or critical companions, has fully blossomed into excavating not only Beckett's own works, but their deeper sources and implications over time. Drawing on the special expertise of the Working Group and its affiliation with the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) has meant that the range of references considered in this book include both more contemporary and more international examples than are available elsewhere. Given the Working Group's focus, the attention here is predominantly on theatre, performance, and media, without losing sight of Beckett's broader literary and philosophical engagements.

This volume is also special because it records the first time that the Working Group meeting was held in Hungary, with a great number of internationally distinguished Beckett scholars coming to Budapest to present, discuss, and develop their papers. The result of the 2017 event is threefold: it provided a chance for Hungarian theatre practitioners and researchers to present their work and engage in a broader dialogue with Beckett scholars from around the world, enabling mutually productive cultural exchange. Secondly, it might inspire more Beckett-related research and theatre activity in Hungary, and

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Graver – Raymond Federman (eds.): Introduction, in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, London and New York, Routledge, [1979] 1999, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Kirschen: The Influences of and on Samuel Beckett, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2008), 148.

raise awareness of the importance of Beckett in education; and finally, it led to the publication of this book, which sets contributions from France, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom in vibrant conversation.

Part 1, "Influencing Beckett," examines some aesthetic, philosophical, and theoretical influences found in Beckett's works. Art often stimulates philosophy and philosophy art. Teresa Rosell Nicolás, in her essay "In Search of Lost Image" that compares Beckett with Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, contends that both writers' anti-conceptual, anti-intellectual idea of art is from Schopenhauer's thought, but in *Krapp's Last Tape*, Beckett subverts the Proustian treatment of an artist and reconfigures the concept related to the involuntary memory that Beckett explores in his early essay *Proust*. Laurens De Vos's paper "The Theatricalization of *Endgame* as the Painterly World of Bram and Geer van Velde: Changing Perspectives in the Poetics of Cubism and Sartre's Phenomenology" traces the notion that *Endgame* could be read as a play about Bram and Geer van Velde's work and as a painting itself. He also attends to strong resemblances to the aesthetics of cubism in the play, which is shared with Jean-Paul Sartre, whose perception structuring his theoretical world is related to a cubist aesthetics. Patrick Armstrong, finding strong influences of Eastern philosophy on Beckett, gives us a new insight in reading his later plays, especially *That Time*. "Samuel Beckett and the Sinic World" demonstrates the Sinic dimension of Beckett's work, arguing that Beckett was intrigued by Eastern philosophy through his early reading of Schopenhauer and other books on ancient Chinese civilization. Beckett's fascination with Sinic culture is shown by the fact that he even refers to Lao-Tzu in the margin of the fourth draft of *That Time*.

Part 2, "Beckett Influencing," shows how Beckett challenges accepted ideas and values in a revolutionary way, as well as how his writing has an impact on his contemporaries and successors. Jonathan Bignell's essay "Random dottiness": Samuel Beckett and the Reception of Harold Pinter's Early Dramas" analyzes the significance of the rejection of Beckett and Pinter in the late 1950s and early 1960s British drama scenes, and their revolutionary roles in changing the meanings of their "brands" through the medium of British radio with the support of Martin Esslin, BBC Head of Drama, and Donald McWhinnie, the BBC Third Programme producer. Today's success of Caryl Churchill, another British playwright, also owes much to them, for her career started from radio scriptwriting. Mariko Hori Tanaka's paper "Samuel Beckett's Legacies in Caryl Churchill's Later Plays" discusses how Churchill's later dramas such as *Here We Go* and *Escaped Alone* are reminiscent of Beckett's plays that describe the vulnerability of being human almost satirically with typically fragmented language, dealing with characters who suffer not only from post-catastrophic trauma but also from

what Paul K. Saint-Amour calls “bukimi” or “pre-traumatic syndrome.” Anita Rákóczy’s “Shoes That Are Left Behind: Gábor Tompa’s Beckett Heritage” is a detailed record of the internationally acclaimed Romanian-Hungarian director Gábor Tompa’s innovative achievement in staging Beckett’s plays. In Tompa’s *Waiting for Godot*, for example, the stage is covered with abandoned shoes, and on top of a large heap of shoes at center stage, reminiscent of death camps, is an old, discarded TV-set; from the screen appears a boy. Tompa often uses electronic devices to surprise the audience; his staging is filled with a jack-in-the-box-like enjoyment. What is unique in Beckett’s influence is that there are many experimental artists in various genres who admire Beckett and create their artworks — often with free use of the very latest technology — that are inspired by and allude to his work. Llewellyn Brown’s essay “Body, the Gaze and Abstraction: from Samuel Beckett to Bruce Nauman” illuminates Beckett’s intentional dissociation between the impersonal dimension of language and the body image stripped of personal elements by focusing on Bruce Nauman’s tribute film entitled “Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk).” The film projects a transposition of Watt’s manner of walking, which Nauman himself performed as Beckett prescribed while having his feet and movements filmed from peculiar angles, so that he looked like an object, invoking a Lacanian “Other.” Yoshiko Takebe, in “Translating Silence: Correlations between Beckett, Chekhov and Hirata,” seeks the possibility of translating Chekhov into different times and cultures by looking into Oriza Hirata’s android version of *The Three Sisters*. Hirata is a Japanese director whose theatre features tranquility and silence. By using an android robot instead of an actor, he creates a mechanical, inhuman atmosphere and strengthens the neutrality and obscurity of the play.

Part 3, “Practitioner Voices,” comprises three essays that focus on Beckett from the viewpoint of practitioners. The first two highlight voices of prominent Hungarian dramaturgs and translators who devoted themselves to bringing Beckett to Hungarian audiences in the time when the country had a socialist regime, and freedom of cultural investigation was restricted. It is fortunate that their testimony is included in this book. Márton Mesterházi, radio dramaturg and script editor, in his essay “How We Made the Hungarian Version of Samuel Beckett’s *All That Fall*,” conveys the difficulty he faced in promoting Beckett’s radio play in the early 1960s when “fig-leaving” prevailed, as well as his relief and delight when his plan to produce *All That Fall* was finally accepted by the Head of Drama Department of Hungarian Radio, after which it was broadcast on 11 January 1968, in Late Night Radio Theatre. Gábor Romhányi Török is an important Hungarian translator of Beckett’s numerous prose works, including his *Three Novels* (1987) and *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (2001). Török’s “My Way with the Work of Samuel Beckett” testifies how deeply he was impressed by Beckett’s art and by the kindness of the author,



who not only allowed him to translate many of his works, but also enabled him to conduct research at the Samuel Beckett Collection in Reading. This book ends with Trinity College Dublin's practitioners Nicholas E. Johnson, Néill O'Dwyer, and Enda Bates, whose essay "Samuel Beckett's *Play* in Digital Culture: Technologies of Influence" documents their *Intermedial Play* project that experiments with Beckett's *Play* through digital culture. With a PTZ (Pan-Tilt-Zoom) robotic teleconferencing camera (designed for surveillance applications) and control unit, a live performance of *Play* was broadcast remotely to an audience in a different location, conceptually paving the way for direct user control over the interrogation in the later *Virtual Play* project. Such experiments expand the possibility of theatre that is not limited to its material presence, challenging notions of theatrical time and space.

The first Beckett production ever staged in Hungary was *Waiting for Godot* in Thália Theatre, 1965. Its co-director Károly Kazimir<sup>4</sup> made considerable efforts to push forward with his bold plan to direct *Godot*, despite opposition from the authorities and censors. György Aczél, a communist politician who ruled the cultural life of János Kádár's regime in Hungary from 1956 to 1988, gave him permission to stage Beckett's play only a restricted number of times (the original agreement was about three performances) in front of a small audience. So Kazimir opened Thália Studio, a 100-seat space, the first studio in Hungary, and *Waiting for Godot* ran a hundred times to packed houses,<sup>5</sup> encouraging artists and inspiring several future Beckett productions. Fifty-two years later, the scholars and artists in this book gathered for the first Hungarian Beckett conference. We hope that many more will follow, and that this volume will be an influencer to upcoming Beckett scholars, as well as a contribution to Beckett Studies in Hungary and worldwide.

### *The Editors*

<sup>4</sup> Károly Kazimir was the Head Artistic Director of Thália Theatre from 1961, then became its Managing Director from 1972 to 1991.

<sup>5</sup> See more about the first Hungarian Beckett production and its reception history in Anita Rákóczy: The *Godots* that Arrived in Hungary, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2017), 285–297.



INTRODUCTION

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PART 1: *INFLUENCING BECKETT*





## IN SEARCH OF LOST IMAGE



TERESA ROSELL NICOLÁS

### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper is to investigate Samuel Beckett's work and its interconnections with Marcel Proust's In Search of Lost Time. Beckett's early essay Proust not only sheds light on the French writer through his observation of the Proustian masterpiece, but also reveals certain aspects that will be relevant in Beckett's later productions. In this sense, Krapp's Last Tape and L'Image, both written in 1958, prove to be especially fruitful, as they show traces of some problematic issues presented by the French author, such as time, habit and memory. Krapp's Last Tape is considered to be Beckett's most Proustian and anti-Proustian piece, as it offers a reconfiguration of the concepts related to involuntary memory by subverting the Proustian enunciation and the treatment of the figure of the artist, that is, the vision of success and failure in the creative process.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> The title of this paper is taken from the article by Florence Godeau: Image première, image dernière, in *Marcel Proust, Europe, Revue littéraire mensuelle* 1012–1013 (September 2013), 155–163.

## THE PROUSTIAN VISION

Beckett's *Proust*<sup>2</sup> (1931) begins with the epigraph "E fango è il mondo" ("And the world is mud"), taken from Giacomo Leopardi's poem *A se stesso*,<sup>3</sup> which anticipates both a radical pessimism and a sense of the illusive nature of existence that are going to be developed in the essay.<sup>4</sup> "Mud," the first noun Beckett wrote on *In Search of Lost Time*, evokes ubiquity and pervasiveness, and it is certainly present in *L'Image* (1959) and *Comment c'est* (1961).<sup>5</sup> In these texts, the use of mud, like sand, clay and dust, already prefigured in *Molloy* (1951) "like [in] so many of Beckett's mud-crawlers,"<sup>6</sup> can be read literally, but it could also be translated as the action of flattening or leveling, as the matter that spreads, covers everything and eliminates any trace of distinctive identity, thus emphasizing "uniformity" and "the absence of the accidental."<sup>7</sup> It is also inevitable to think of mud as the primeval substance out of which creation occurs, that is, the potentiality of the particular out of the universal.

According to Lawrence Harvey, "the notion of surface and depth recurs in *Proust*."<sup>8</sup> The physical being that inhabits the outside world is defined by Beckett as a "carapace of paste and pewter,"<sup>9</sup> but "hidden deep within this exterior shell, in what Proust calls the 'gouffre interdit à nos sondes', is the pearl that represents the essence of our many selves,"<sup>10</sup> the multiple identities of the modern subject. After reading Proust, Beckett understands that the artist does not deal with the surface and that "art is the apotheosis of solitude."<sup>11</sup> For him, the only

<sup>2</sup> *Proust* is widely considered Beckett's main contribution to literary criticism. In order to write this essay, he read *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust's masterpiece, twice during the summer of 1930 in the "abominable" edition of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. The sixteen volumes that comprise Proust's completed novel were published from 1913 to 1927, the last three posthumously. Beckett worked entirely with the original French edition. In the essay he himself translated into English some citations he used from the French novel without using the already existing English translation of the first volumes by Scott Moncrieff. Beckett wrote *Proust* in the summer of 1930, and it was published in Chatto & Windus, London, in 1931.

<sup>3</sup> Leopardi's *A se stesso* is one of the five poems belonging to the *Ciclo di Aspasia*, included in *I Canti* (1835). The volume, edited in 1936 by Ettore Fabietti, Milan, is represented in Beckett's library in Paris. (See Dirk Van Hulle – Mark Nixon: *Samuel Beckett's Library*, New York, Cambridge University, 2013, 116 and 276.)

<sup>4</sup> Another, more humorous interpretation could be related to James Joyce, as it seems he enjoyed the pun "è il mondo" ("the world is") and "è immondo" ("it is filthy").

<sup>5</sup> *L'Image* was first published in French in *X: A Quarterly Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 1959), 35–37. It was later developed and included in *Comment c'est* (1961).

<sup>6</sup> Ulrika Maude: Pavlov's Dogs and Other Animals in Samuel Beckett, in M. Bryden: *Beckett and Animals*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 2013, 82–93.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Harvey: *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic*, Princeton, Princeton University, 1970, 404.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Proust*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1931, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Harvey: *Samuel Beckett*, 404.

<sup>11</sup> Beckett: *Proust*, 47.

possible development lies in the sense of depth: "The only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent. The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extra-circumferential phenomena, drawn into the core of the eddy."<sup>12</sup> Proust describes the surface of the epidermis as the facade behind which the Idea is imprisoned.<sup>13</sup> It is the task of the artist to recover the "form" out of uniformity.

Beckett was soon seduced by Proust's new postulate which was based on offering a reality that is not intelligible in a total, immediate way, even though this is precisely what puzzled his first readers. Until then, a literary piece of work was presented as an understandable whole that offered a coherent picture of reality and its characters in an explainable world.

According to René Albérès, in Proust's oeuvre a new vision can be perceived, that is, the very nature of perception, the point of view: the eye of the reader ceases to occupy a privileged place, and instead, there is a whirlwind of images that gives us the impression of suffering from myopia or presbyopia, because visions are taken from too close or too far, which requires from the reader a constant effort of adaptation and identification.<sup>14</sup> Through hundreds of images, Proust abandons the attempt to follow the thread of a succession of "adventures" and starts to expose a series of self-reflections through a chaotic disorder of impressions. In this new artistic architecture, Proust encourages novels not to be just "stories," but journeys of spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic adventures: intimate epics. Thus, his creative work could no longer be seen as the logical development of an account, but as the search for an enigma.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, *In Search of Lost Time* brings a new dimension in contrast to the traditional construction, the latter consisting of episodes that are rigidly chained toward a plot and a denouement. As this new approach is built under the sleep-wake state, the reader is immersed in a world without direction, showing the discontinuity of the modern novel. Proust is not only considering the problem of reality or of sleep, but rather the issue of the representation of the reality of the modern subject, as it is difficult to grasp a human being that is undergoing constant changes in consecutive "selves." In *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator is lost in a forest of images that become his own representations, as in the phantasmagoria that takes place in the Guermantes matinée. The nightmare comes when the narrator enters the hall in a panoramic view through a gallery of deformed mirrors that show old, faded, unrecognizable, caricatured characters; only big moustaches and white beards that move, gesture and chat, as if they were alive. He cannot remember

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>13</sup> The "Idea" as the "ideal real" in the words of Arthur Schopenhauer, that is, not abstract but concrete and particular.

<sup>14</sup> René M. Albérès: *Métamorphoses du roman*, Paris, Éditions Albin Michel, 1972, 14–15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 16.

or even put a name to any of these wax-like faces. This exaggerated, sardonic effect is prolonged.<sup>16</sup> It is epic and comic, but it also reveals a tragic feature: the portrait of failure and the evidence of finitude through an image of lost/wasted time. As Albèrès suggests, the problem of art is a problem of “vision.” In this sense, what is “real” does not depend as much on reality as on the variable focal system with which to see. This is how the narrator begins to be aware of his own finiteness: he simply cannot see clearly; his visual system is not working properly as he is becoming old.

Following this procedure, Proust denies the time that is purely external and the possibility of an objective representation of the world. Memory is unable to reproduce the feeling of a lifetime, which can only be replaced by distorted images. In this sense, the French author repudiates art as a collection of conventional postcards. For him, and also for Beckett, they are only clichés as opposed to a text to be deciphered.

Beckettian scholars including John Pilling, Hugh Kenner and Lawrence Harvey have recognized echoes of Proust in Beckett since the 60s and claim that traces of Proust should not be underestimated.<sup>17</sup> Molloy begins with the sentence “I am in my mother’s room”<sup>18</sup> and finishes evoking the revelation in *In Search of Lost Time* with the resolution of writing *the* book: “But in the end I understood this language. I understood it [...] It told me to write the report [...] Then I went back into the house and wrote.”<sup>19</sup> Hugh Kenner also points out that Molloy and Malone write in bed, like the narrator and Proust himself, and compares the dustbins in *Endgame* with the imaginary perfume bottles in Proust, in which the past is closed and sealed:

A quarter century later in *Endgame*, where Hamm’s active lifelong denial of love translating the Proustian apathy into a rhetoric of revulsion has made everything go wrong, those perfumed jars where the past is sealed away are transmogrified into two ash cans, which dominate the left side of the stage in metallic obduracy and contain his legless parents. His mother, in one of them, is rapt back by a chance remark to Lake Como, and for a few minutes enjoys before our eyes the Proustian bliss (‘It was deep, deep. And you could see down to the bottom. So white. So clean.’). And emanating from the other ash can the father’s rebuke recalls the child’s insomnia.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 82–83.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Harvey also suggests possible Proustian elements in Beckett’s early works, such as *Cascando*, *Watt* and *More Pricks Than Kicks*. See Harvey: *Samuel Beckett*.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Three Novels*, New York, Grove, 2009, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Kenner: *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, New York, Grove, 1961, 44.

*PROUST, THE ESSAY: THE FRAGMENTED MODERN SUBJECT*

A thorough analysis of the essay *Proust* reveals that one of the strongest links between Proust and Beckett is the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer.<sup>21</sup> On 25 August 1930, in a letter to Thomas MacGreevy, Beckett says that he intends to study Schopenhauer's *Aphorisms: The Wisdom of Life*, as Proust admired it "for its originality and guarantee of wide reading — transformed."<sup>22</sup> Beckett felt that grasping what Proust had read was part of his work as an essayist and critic.<sup>23</sup>

In *Proust*, Beckett constantly uses Schopenhauer's thought as a reference point in order to expose the central pillars of Proust's novel, and it can be said that what Beckett admires most in Proust's approach is the influence of the philosopher: the prospect of an anti-conceptual, anti-intellectual idea of art. If Proust and Beckett shared common interests, their common themes are present in Schopenhauer's thought: the failure of intellectualism, time and loss, the relationship between time and space, habit and repetition or the relationship between victim and offender.<sup>24</sup> In his essay, Beckett questions rationalist and positivist approaches and chooses intuition — a kind of *élan vital*.<sup>25</sup> In this regard, Beckett highlights Proust's option, involuntary memory, in clear opposition to the conscious attempts of reason to reconstruct the past. Beckett also uses philosophical terms like "correlative objects" or "the ideal-real" that reinforce Schopenhauer's philosophy to build *Proust's* theoretical framework.

The main themes developed in *Proust* are time, habit and memory. In the essay, Beckett analyses characters in *In Search of Lost Time* as "victims," "prisoners" of Time, "lower organisms" "deformed" by "yesterday": "Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday. A calamitous day, but calamitous not necessarily in content."<sup>26</sup>

Time creates a subject that is multiple, and this fact conditions the relation between this subject and the object. According to Beckett, nothing can be apprehended in a reasoned order of succession because the subject and the object are in constant transformation. The object does not have its own significance, but it is dislocated in the always-moving consciousness. For this

<sup>21</sup> See Ulrich Pothast: *The Metaphysical Vision: Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Art and Life and Samuel Beckett's Own Way to Make Use of It*, New York, Peter Lang, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Martha D. Fehsenfeld – Lois M. Overbeck (eds.): *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–1940*, Vol. 1, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 2009, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Van Hulle – Nixon: *Samuel Beckett's Library*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> One of the longest passages commented in *Proust* is the relationship between the narrator and Albertine in *The Prisoner* and *The Fugitive*.

<sup>25</sup> Vera G. Lee: Beckett on Proust, *Romanic Review* 69 (May 1978), 199.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



reason, voluntary memory is not valuable. But time is ambivalent, and Beckett insists on the dialectic double structure of Proust's novel: Time condemns, but it also saves, and to illustrate it, Beckett uses classic metaphors like Janus' Bifrons and Telephus' spear, which wounds and heals at the same time.

When Beckett examines the role of habit in Proust, he also shows the dual nature of the phenomenon. For the narrator in *In Search of Lost Time*, habit serves both as palliative and blinders that obstruct the vision of the world.<sup>27</sup> In the novel, when habit is interrupted, for example when the narrator sleeps in a strange room, he suffers terribly. If habit in Proust has a dual function that makes choosing impossible between "the boredom of living and the suffering of Being"<sup>28</sup> in the artist, Beckett extends it to the entire human condition and shows it in the repetitive actions carried out by his own characters, actions that deny a true experience. "If habit," writes Proust, "is a second nature, it keeps us in ignorance of the first."<sup>29</sup> In Proust's work, man is a creature of habit immersed in space and time. Life is a succession of agreements between the subject and the objective world, and customary actions help stabilize relationships and make life tolerable, even though it is monotonous. The superficial subject that is a product of habit dies once and again during the course of life so that a new "I" can emerge. In Beckett's later work, the chance of rebirth that Proust's narrator experiences is denied, as habit suppresses suffering and even reality.

The impossibility of a centered, autotelic unity in the modern subject is also developed in Beckett's article *Proust in Pieces* (1934).<sup>30</sup> This short review deals with Albert Feuillerat's *Comment Proust a composé son roman*.<sup>31</sup> While Feuillerat strongly deplores Proust's chaos and lack of continuity, in his critique Beckett stresses his objection to "uniformity, homogeneity, cohesion,"<sup>32</sup> as he had already pointed out in his *Proust*. According to Kawashima:

If Proust's subject formation is fascinating to Beckett, this is because it juxtaposes multiple and sometimes fragmentally incongruent elements which cannot be consumed in the unification of a total subject. For Beckett, the celebrated 'involuntary memory' is not only the temporal duplication of past and present but also a moment that explodes the unitary formation of the subject.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Lee: Beckett on Proust, 200.

<sup>28</sup> Beckett: *Proust*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Proust in Pieces*, in Ruby Cohn (ed.): *Disjecta*, New York, Grove, 1984, 63–65.

<sup>31</sup> Feuillerat's book was published by Librairie Droz, Paris, in 1934.

<sup>32</sup> Beckett: *Proust in Pieces*, 64.

<sup>33</sup> Takeshi Kawashima: *Conjunction of the Essential and the Incidental: Fragmentation and Juxtaposition; or Samuel Beckett's Critical Writings in the 1930s*, in *After Beckett / D'après Beckett, Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2004), 472.

In *Proust in Pieces* Beckett praises Proust's emphasis in showing the fact that inconsistencies and contradictory oppositions are affirmed without synthesis instead of opposing contraries in order to attain intellectual unification.<sup>34</sup> Only uncontrollable, unconscious elements can lead to a sort of deep knowledge of the subject. If for Feuillerat, accidental, incompatible, and clashing aspects show dissolution, in Proust's novel, "Beckett foregrounds inconsistent and aleatory features which are incommensurable with the tendency toward calculated, essential integrity, rather than the latter's dialectic subsumption of the former."<sup>35</sup>

The new constituent element of this process is "involuntary memory," which differs from "voluntary memory," a concept that Proust introduced modifying Bergson's "pure memoire." In *Proust*, Beckett defines "involuntary memory" as the ability that is required to evoke an image both from the past and from the unity underlying the complexity of human action.<sup>36</sup> In *In Search of Lost Time*, the "miracle of evocation," which starts from intense sensory perceptions and which Beckett called "fetishes"<sup>37</sup> or "privileged moments" — the famous madeleine dipped in tea — occurs when a sense of the past is repeated to recreate the original experience in the present and *make it real for the first time*.

On the other hand, "voluntary memory" is the "uniform memory of intelligence."<sup>38</sup> The images evoked by it are "arbitrary" and "remote from reality" and their actions can be compared to the gesture of turning the pages of a photo album: "the material that it furnishes contains nothing of the past, but merely a blurred and uniform projection once removed of our anxiety and opportunism — that is to say, nothing."<sup>39</sup>

#### KRAPP'S LAST TAPE: AN ANTI-PROUSTIAN PLAY?

Like the narrator in Proust's novel and Krap, the character from *Eleuthéria* (1947), Krapp has rejected the world in order to obtain a higher goal: writing his magnum opus. The result of this rejection, however, is not the culmination reached by Marcel in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. It is evident that in *Krapp's Last Tape* some basic issues in Proust's novel continue to show an

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 472.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 473.

<sup>36</sup> Beckett: *Proust*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

influence on Beckett, especially the function of memory. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, Beckett presents a new type of container of memory through the use of new technology: the tape recorder.

In *Proust*, Beckett characterizes the relationship between the individual subject and his past in the following terms: "The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multi-colored by the phenomena of its hours."<sup>40</sup> It is important to remark the past as "colorful," given the monochromatic effect that Beckett uses in *Krapp's Last Tape*. The Irish author, following Proust, distinguishes between voluntary memory, remembered in black and white, and involuntary memory, that "conjures in all the relief and color" the "essential significance" of the past.<sup>41</sup>

Chris Ackerley considers that the metaphor of the vessel as repository of memory manifests itself in Beckett's oeuvre:

Molloy refers to 'that sealed jar' to which he owes his being so well preserved; the Unnamable [the character], in the French original, equally imagines himself as 'entouré, dans un capharnaüm.' That novel, in either language, is dominated by the unforgettable image of the once 'great traveller' planted in his pot [...]. Nagg and Nell in *Endgame* are 'bottled' in their bins; and the three participants in *Play* each speak from an urn, in which their bodies and their memories are trapped.<sup>42</sup>

The spools in *Krapp's Last Tape* are tools to access Krapp's past. These spools are numbered and catalogued, so that he can have access to them whenever he wants to recover those "items" that are recorded and properly titled as if they were files. Krapp is obsessed with order and also with the fantasy that dominates his life, that he has full control over it. He is able to go back to his past and manipulate it with the use of the tape that goes backwards and forwards. He has his life in his hands. The voices of the younger Krapp — that create a succession of Krapps, following Proust — are recorded and reflect objectively Krapp's past. However, these are nothing more than looking at an album of black and white photographs.

Habit in Krapp has been rigorously kept for the last thirty years, from the moment he decided to abandon love<sup>43</sup> and devote his life to art and writing,

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

<sup>41</sup> Ackerley: The Past in Monochrome: (In)voluntary Memory in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, in D. Guardamagna – R. M. Sebellin (eds.): *The Tragic Comedy of Samuel Beckett. "Beckett in Rome" 17–19 April 2008*, Università degli Studi di Roma «Tor Vergata» Gius, Laterza & Figgìe, 2009, 279.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>43</sup> Krapp seems to have given up on his desire for love, even though bananas seem to work as a replacement.

like Marcel. Krapp is the personification of failure, precisely of the same kind of failure that Marcel felt during all his life, when he frequented the Guermantes and the snobbish high-class families in Paris, whose names promised so much. The importance of names as symbolic utterances, like the pronunciation of the word *Guermantes* for Marcel, can also be manifested in Krapp's joy when uttering the word *spool*, the vessel which holds the moment of culmination in his life that turned out to be a failure. While the superficial, snobbish, fruitless life of Proust's narrator ends up with a moment of sublimation, this is not the case in Krapp, the character. After a series of experiences related to involuntary memory, which have lasted for many years and are manifested through the senses that have the power to remove the subject from the flow of time, Proust's narrator discovers that the time has come to put something in writing. The first time the narrator has this kind of experience he is unable to interpret it reasonably, even though he feels it is crucial; he does not understand the happiness that invades him when he wipes his lips with a starched napkin. Many years later, when entering the Guermantes mansion, he steps on an uneven cobblestone and grasps the essence of those epiphanies that will allow him to write.

When Krapp is listening to the tape, there are two moments that could be interpreted as those aforementioned life experiences. The first concerns his mother's death. However, the memories of "Mother at rest" show the uniformity of consciousness, and Krapp does not seem to recognize the situation or even the words that his younger self uses in his flat account; the second is the long awaited, sublime vision that would represent the quintessential climatic instant: the vision of himself facing immensity, beyond time and space, the height of his spiritual aspirations. However, Beckett transforms this sublime moment, the quintessential representation of the Romantic artist, into a tragicomic turn: "Krapp: [...] Slight improvement in bowel condition... Hm... Memorable... what? (*He peers closer.*) Equinox, memorable equinox. (*He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.*) Memorable equinox?..."<sup>44</sup> Just by chance, he then listens to the scene of the girl in the punt and does not return compulsively to the last scene of the vision, but to this one in particular. Something unexpected appears in two flashes of green: "A girl in a shabby green coat" and eyes of "...chrysolite!"<sup>45</sup> In this experience of involuntary memory, Krapp has a deep vision, which makes him feel *real* for the first time, as he painfully and fragmentarily reconstructs the image of an instant when Krapp (the subject) and the girl's (the object) sights merged beyond time and space in the punt: "Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Krapp's Last Tape*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber and Faber, 1990, 217.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

As Beckett states in *Proust*: “at once imaginative and empirical, at once an evocation and a direct perception, real without being merely actual, ideal without being merely abstract, the ideal real, the essential, the extratemporal.”<sup>47</sup> However, the older Krapp, compulsively and repetitively sunk in that “great deadener” that is habit, sadly and motionlessly listens to the younger Krapp, who, having abandoned love, still lives under the same ideal fantasy of success in his creative process: “Not with the fire in me now.”<sup>48</sup> Dramatically, Krapp as a character does experience not evolution but regression; tragically, *Krapp’s Last Tape* represents the reversal of the Proustian revelation, and instead it shows the deep truth of an unattainable image.

### MUD

In 1958 Beckett wrote *Krapp’s Last Tape* and also *L’image* in French. This monologue in the first person — and without punctuation — can be read as a reflection on reminiscence that also contravenes Proustian ecstasy, as Florence Godeau affirms.<sup>49</sup> The French scholar states that if this reminiscence in Proust’s narrator comes from recovering the taste of the madeleine, in *L’image* it comes from an anonymous character who is lying face down on the ground, in the mud: “The tongue gets clogged with mud only one remedy then pull it in and suck it swallow the mud or spit question to know whether it is nourishing and vistas though not having to drink often I take a mouthful.”<sup>50</sup>

The narrator’s tongue becoming clogged with mud can be interpreted in different ways. According to Daniela Caselli, the mud carries out “a painfully detailed exploration of the materiality of speech and in its investigation of how repetition and reproduction confer the status of reality upon invisibility,”<sup>51</sup> but “the mud is also the pleasure of the text itself aspiring to become the materiality of the eroticized body without fissures,”<sup>52</sup> meaning, thus, an artistic creation.

The narrator in *L’image* seems to be living in the last stage of his life in search of a lost image: “and the eyes what are the eyes doing closed to be sure no since suddenly there in the mud I see me.”<sup>53</sup> The scene that appears from the mud is a “happy” moment. The narrator sees himself young again, hearty and with acne,

<sup>47</sup> Beckett: *Proust*, 56.

<sup>48</sup> Beckett: *Krapp’s Last Tape*, 223.

<sup>49</sup> Godeau: *Image première, image dernière*, 155.

<sup>50</sup> Samuel Beckett: *The Image* (translated into English by Edith Fournier), in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski, New York, Grove, 1995, 165. Originally written in French with the title *L’image*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1988.

<sup>51</sup> Daniela Caselli: *Beckett’s Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism*, Manchester, Manchester University, 2005, 156.

<sup>52</sup> Caselli: *Beckett’s Dantes*, 159.

<sup>53</sup> Beckett: *The Image*, 166.

walking and holding hands with a young girl. These naïve but comical features that present the younger character share some aspects already developed in Krapp. The idyllic but also humorous image of a deep moment recovered from the past, and one that he truly seems to be experiencing, ironically shows the disappointing future of the character in the present scene in a way similar to the one in the punt in *Krapp's Last Tape*.

Unlike Proustian privileged moments, in Beckett's oeuvre, particularly in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *L'Image*, reminiscences, which are extremely fragile and aroused with a painful effort, are associated to the memory of someone lost. This fact emphasizes the complete solitude of the characters that can evoke privileged moments which could have diverted them from failure, while the narrator in Proust achieves sublimation as a lone, self-sufficient omnipotent artist.

According to Godeau,<sup>54</sup> if the crisis of the modern subject and of language in Proust are displayed through snobbish chatting, procrastination or creative impotence, in the end these elements are overcome. In Beckett, however, the result is a condemnation to repetition, like Tantalus, the Greek mythological figure famous for his eternal punishment: "So that we are rather in the position of Tantalus, with this difference, that we allow ourselves to be tantalized."<sup>55</sup> The images created through reminiscences by Krapp or the character in *L'Image* are sensitive and illusory traces that are definitely lost.

The collection of conventional black and white postcards that Krapp rescues from the spools are opposed to Proust's idea of life as a text to be deciphered. If the task of the artist is to recover form out of uniformity, the appearance of those "privileged" moments display the only certainty that Beckett's characters can have: they *make life real for the first time*.

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<sup>54</sup> Godeau: *Image première, image dernière*, 160.

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THE THEATRICALIZATION OF *ENDGAME* AS THE  
PAINTERLY WORLD OF BRAM AND GEER VAN VELDE:  
CHANGING PERSPECTIVES IN THE POETICS OF CUBISM  
AND SARTRE'S PHENOMENOLOGY

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LAURENS DE VOS

ABSTRACT

*Beckett was strongly engaged in contemporary art, and had a few painters among his best friends in Paris, including the brothers Bram and Geer van Velde. Partly to support them and present their work to a wider audience, he wrote a few essays about their oeuvre. However, not only do these essays tell us how Beckett perceived their work aesthetically, they also shed light on the playwright's own poetics, which accounts for his huge admiration for both brothers' work. While Bram van Velde's paintings show his inner world, Geer's work, with an inclination towards cubism, is directed outwards. The claim of this essay will be that *Endgame* can be read as a commentary on both painters' work. Moreover, the essay will discuss how the play is informed by Sartre's phenomenology that is in itself indebted to a cubist aesthetics.*

*Endgame* is very much a play about theatre, without many extra-theatrical or extra-textual references. The theatrical environment in the here and now seems to be the only existing reality. Some decades earlier, Beckett wrote two essays on the poetics of the paintings of the Dutch brothers Geer and Bram van Velde. His letters from that period reveal how reluctant and insecure he was in writing these pieces of art criticism, but his motivation to help his good friends gain somewhat more recognition in art circles prevailed over his sincere self-doubts as an art critic. Interestingly, the joke about God and the tailor bridges the first essay with *Endgame*, and the link with the van Velde brothers is confirmed in Charles Juliet's account of his conversations with Bram, who "tells us that while reading *Fin de Partie* he has sometimes thought he recognized the tone and odd fragments of their [i.e. Bram van Velde and Beckett's] conversations."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, beyond this passing comment Juliet did not expand on the nature of possible echoes or resemblances. This essay will therefore make an attempt to trace how *Endgame* may be read as

<sup>1</sup> Charles Juliet: *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, Leiden, Academic Press Leiden, 1995, 47–48.



a play about Bram and Geer's work, indeed as a painting itself. Moreover, if a cubist poetics, as I will show relying on Sartre, underlies both Geer van Velde's paintings and *Endgame*, the shift of perception that accompanies this aesthetics may account for the play's preoccupation with blindness.

The characters and situation in *Endgame* present themselves as purely formalist elements that only exist in the environment of the theatre for which they are created. There are hardly any references to an outside world, except a few vague descriptions by Clov when he looks outside through two small windows. Neither we nor the characters themselves have any idea where they are, where the play is situated, in which milieu, which period. Neither do we get to know much about their backgrounds. Alain Robbe-Grillet attributes Beckett's characters with nothing but the Heideggerian quality of being-there, *Dasein*: "The condition of man, says Heidegger, is to be *there*. The theatre probably reproduces this situation more naturally than any of the other ways of representing reality. The essential thing about a character in a play is that he is 'on the scene': *there*."<sup>2</sup> As Hamm so poignantly states, "Outside of here it's death."<sup>3</sup> We indeed find in *Endgame* "the essential theme: presence. Everything that is, is here; off the stage there is nothing, non-being."<sup>4</sup>

In a play such as *Play*, the poetics of a formalist independence of the text and the theatrical world without context is contrasted with the presence of a narrative about adultery; on the basis of the storyline the three characters do seem to share some extra-textual past. On the other hand, though, their comments seem to reflect as much their uneasiness with the light alternately shining on one of them. The beam of light, however, is no instrument highlighting the character that wishes to speak his or her mind, but seems more an instrument of torture that forces them to speak. While W1 is cursing the "hellish half-light," M is craving for "[s]ilence and darkness."<sup>5</sup> In the case of an existence that is entirely dependent on the theatrical situation and its spotlights, turning off the light indeed means non-existence and death. This is why, turning back to *Endgame*, Mother Pegg has died of darkness. "*Esse est percipi* [To be is to be perceived],"<sup>6</sup> recalling Berkeley's statement that also precedes *Film*. Leaving the stage equals death. Hence, "There's nowhere else."<sup>7</sup> If the entire universe is a theatre, this by necessity turns Hamm and

<sup>2</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet: Samuel Beckett, or 'Presence' in the Theatre, in Martin Esslin (ed.): *Samuel Beckett: A collection of critical essays*, New Jersey, Englewood Cliffs, 1965, 108.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Dramatic Works, The Grove Centenary Edition*, Vol. III, New York, Grove, 2006, 143.

<sup>4</sup> Robbe-Grillet: Samuel Beckett, or 'Presence', 114.

<sup>5</sup> Beckett: *Dramatic Works*, 365.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

Clow into actors. Particularly the former is very much aware of the role he is assigned: "Me... To play,"<sup>8</sup> he states several times, while towards the end getting ready for his last soliloquy.

When Beckett's characters do not represent something in some distant time and place, but simply present themselves as themselves, we find Beckett applying the same poetics that he appreciates so much in the paintings of his Dutch friends Bram and Geer van Velde. In his essay *La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon* published in *Cahiers d'art* (1945/46), Beckett describes Bram van Velde's paintings as not referring to anything in the outside world. They are what they are. Letting go of the classical mimesis idea, he also breaks up the Saussurean connection between signifier and signified. In his comments Beckett adheres to a formalist poetics that has no intention of representing the world outside the painting.

To write a purely visual apperception is to write a sentence without signification. It speaks for itself. Because every time we want to subject the words to a real act of transference, every time we want them to express something other than the words, they organize themselves so they cancel each other.<sup>9</sup>

It will come as no surprise that Beckett feels at home with the van Velde brothers in that he recognizes in their art the impossibility to express, which also marks his own writings. The continuity of trial and failure is at the heart of Bram van Velde's poetics too: "I paint the impossibility of painting," he is recorded saying.<sup>10</sup> His paintings do not express anything; that is, his art is liberated from an ideal or a material cause, but the impossibility to express does not paralyze him. His art, according to Beckett, presents us with the conditions of non-expression.

A few years later, in *Peintres de l'Empêchement* (1948), Beckett expands on his art criticism regarding both brothers' oeuvre and poetics. Though they start from the same problem — the issue of the impossibility of representation itself — they follow two different paths to pursue this question.

Because what is left to represent if the essence of the object is that it withdraws from any representation?

What is left to represent are the conditions of this withdrawal. They take one or other of two forms, depending on the subject.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 92, 140, 151.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, New York, Grove, 1984, 125; my translation. French original: "Écrire aperception purement visuelle, c'est écrire une phrase dénuée de sens. Comme de bien entendu. Car chaque fois qu'on veut faire faire aux mots un véritable travail de transbordement, chaque fois qu'on veut leur faire exprimer autre chose que des mots, ils s'alignent de façon à s'annuler mutuellement."

<sup>10</sup> Juliet: *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, 43.

The one will say: I can't see the object that I want to represent, because it is what it is. And the other: I can't see the object that I want to represent, because I am who I am.

Those two kinds of artists have always existed, those two kinds of impediments, the impediment-object and the impediment-eye. But these impediments have been taken into account. One has been able to adapt. They were not part of the representation, or hardly at least. But here they are part of it. The biggest part I would say. What impedes painting is painted.

Geer van Velde is an artist of the first kind (in my hesitant opinion), Bram van Velde of the second.

Their painting is an analysis of a state of privation, an analysis in which the first one borrows his terms from the outside, light and the void, and the other one from the inside, darkness, plenitude, phosphorescence.<sup>11</sup>

*Endgame* is Beckett's dramatic translation of the poetics he recognizes in the van Velde brothers' oeuvre. Not only is his art criticism on their paintings an almost explicit comment on his own aesthetic stance, more than any other play *Endgame* serves as the artistic counterpart of these essays. Not coincidentally, a quotation that Beckett will later spin out in this play precedes the first of these articles and has also served as an inspiration for the title:

THE CUSTOMER: God made the world in six days, and you, you are not even capable of making me some trousers in six months.

THE TAILOR: But sir, look at the world, and look at your trousers.<sup>12</sup>

*Endgame* is centered on the fundamental opposition between Bram's darkness and Geer's light. The place that is occupied by Hamm and Clov seems to have

<sup>11</sup> Beckett: *Disjecta*, 136; my translation. French original: "Car que reste-t-il de représentable si l'essence de l'objet est de se dérober à la représentation?"

Il reste à représenter les conditions de cette dérobade. Elles prendront l'une ou l'autre de deux formes, selon le sujet.

L'un dira: Je ne peux voir l'objet, pour le représenter, parce qu'il est ce qu'il est. L'autre: Je ne peux voir l'objet, pour le représenter, parce que je suis ce que je suis.

Il y a toujours eu ces deux sortes d'artiste, ces deux sortes d'empêchement, l'empêchement-objet et l'empêchement-oeil. Mais ces empêchements, on en tenait compte. Il y avait accommodation. Ils ne faisaient pas partie de la représentation, ou à peine. Ici ils en font partie. On dirait la plus grande partie. Est peint ce qui empêche de peindre.

Geer van Velde est un artiste de la première sorte (à mon chancelant avis), Bram van Velde de la seconde.

Leur peinture est l'analyse d'un état de privation, analyse empruntant chez l'un les termes du dehors, la lumière et le vide, chez l'autre ceux du dedans, l'obscurité, le plein, la phosphorescence."

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 118; my translation. French original: 'LE CLIENT: Dieu a fait le monde en six jours, et vous, vous n'êtes pas foutu de me faire un pantalon en six mois. LE TAILLEUR: Mais Monsieur, regardez le monde, et regardez votre pantalon.'

affinities with Bram's dark world, enclosed and isolated, bearing no relation whatsoever to a world or reality out there. Charles Juliet recounts Beckett describing Bram as a hermit, or some anxious, shivering dog, living in a studio that might very well resemble Hamm's shelter where the only decoration is a picture with its face to the wall, unseen for the audience: "It was dreadful, he says, Bram was living in a terrible poverty, all alone in his studio with his paintings, which he was showing to nobody. He had just lost his wife and was so dejected... He let me get a little closer to him. It was a case of finding a way to speak to him to try to get through to him."<sup>13</sup> It is not too difficult to recognize in Hamm's description of the lunatic the painter and engraver Bram, for whom representative images have no value, since the inner world of everything merely consists of ashes.

HAMM: I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter – and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! [...] He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. [...] He alone had been spared. [...] Forgotten.<sup>14</sup>

Clov and Hamm's dwelling mirrors Bram's inner world of darkness, where time does not exist to chronicle a life. Should it surprise that when Clov wants to install time by hanging up the alarm clock it is at the expense of the picture, Bram's very medium? As opposed to the telescope as an instrument for looking out, orientation inwards is also reflected (by lack thereof) in Hamm's complete and Clov's partial blindness. Not only did Bram consider himself — and man in general — as unable to see the truth of the world for which his work might be the best possible solace, "Painting is the guide to the blind man that is me,"<sup>15</sup> he was also literally strongly myopic, if we are to believe an anecdote by his agent Jacques Putman. Charles Juliet recounts how Bram once found a pair of spectacles in a dustbin and kept them for twenty years. When Putman eventually accompanied him to have his eyes checked, the optician was flabbergasted and asked him what his job was, to which Bram responded: "I paint my inner life."<sup>16</sup>

Bram and Hamm's inner universe is a world in which structuring principles fall flat completely due to lack of a reality that could connect them. Hence, Clov's complaint that he was taught a language by Hamm that apparently does

<sup>13</sup> Juliet: *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, 142; my italics.

<sup>14</sup> Beckett: *Dramatic Works*, 122.

<sup>15</sup> Juliet: *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

not mean anything anymore, thereby referring to Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest*, not only applies to the servant but is — literally — universally felt by all four characters. Once what J. L. Austin would call the performative function of language is taken apart, it loses all signification. When the promise of a sugar-plum to Nagg or a pain-killer to Hamm turns out to be not kept, in retrospect it will have been nothing more than a non-meaning, a hollow phrase, as hollow as the walls of the theatrical set on which Hamm knocks. So is Clov's threat that he may leave Hamm when it appears that "[t]here's nowhere else."<sup>17</sup> Words have become empty signifiers with no connection to a meaningful reality. Time indicators merely refer back to themselves and as stimuli trigger at most an automatic, instinctive but equally meaningless effect, as in Nell's elegiac sighing for the word "yesterday." Here too, Beckett's words about Bram's paintings apply all too well to *Endgame*, a world that has equally come to a standstill because, as Hamm proclaims near the end of the play, "time was never and time is over"<sup>18</sup>: "space and body, completed, unalterable, torn from time by the time maker."<sup>19</sup> No wonder then that Hamm's suggestion "Perhaps it's a little vein," of which Nagg explicitly concludes that "[t]hat means nothing,"<sup>20</sup> will later turn out to refer to Hamm's dark mental world. According to him, a little vein might be the cause of the dripping in his head.<sup>21</sup>

So if Beckett considers Bram's art an analysis of the inner world, he attributes to Geer's a direction outwards, to light and emptiness. Geer "is entirely directed towards the outside, towards the chaos of things in light, towards time."<sup>22</sup> Outside is light. Indeed, Hamm and Clov's shelter does have two windows, but they do not face a realistic daily (everyday) panorama. While the right window shows nothing but earth, apparently the left overlooks a mass of sea. It is under this window that Hamm thinks he feels light shining on his blind face.

The setting consisting of these two windows is as formalist as the entire play. Whether the curtains are drawn or not does not make much of a difference. Earth and sea are the only indications given to us as to what may be seen through them. Rather than creating a depth, they seem flat and two-dimensional color areas. Beckett's second essay on the van Velde brothers' art was published in *Derrière le Miroir* in 1948. A couple of years later, this journal devoted an issue to Geer van Velde, and as its title page chose a painting that has two colored squares in it. This painting may have been the inspiration for Beckett

<sup>17</sup> Beckett: *Dramatic Works*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>19</sup> Beckett: *Disjecta*, 125; my translation. French original: "Espace et corps, achevés, inaltérables, arrachés au temps par le faiseur de temps".

<sup>20</sup> Beckett: *Dramatic Works*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>22</sup> Beckett: *Disjecta*, 128; my translation. French original: "est entièrement tourné vers le dehors, vers le tohu-bohu des choses dans la lumière, vers le temps".

to draw his own highly cubist scenography for his play, that strongly resembles a pictorial composition of horizontals and verticals. Amidst the greyness of the world, the blue left window is the sea, and the red right window the earth.

Beckett considers Geer's paintings shadowless and weightless, creating a universe in which everything is constantly in motion. In his description of Geer's art we can see the very crux of what *Endgame* is about, a play about the end that never ends: "All ends, endlessly."<sup>23</sup>

I would suggest that the cubist poetics that *Endgame* has in common with these paintings implies a decentralized way of looking that radically changes one's ego-conscious subjectivity in relation to the environment. Along with other avant-garde movements during the first half of the twentieth century, and in the wake of the emergence of psychoanalysis, the self is subjected to a process of fragmentation. Cubism too develops as a style where the autonomy of the self is perceived as an illusory Gestalt. Hence, as a result the optical illusion of three-dimensionality yields to the flatness of the canvas without distinction between foreground and background. These ideas also lie at the foundation of the geometric paintings of this other Dutch painter, Piet Mondrian, probably the most famous cubist internationally. Lines do not exist in reality, he argued, but only set against a specific background does an image jump forward from the lines in which our mental map immediately recognizes certain objects. Wishing to bypass this mentally generated but delusive hierarchy of background and foreground, Mondrian started working on compositions of colored areas where the illusion of the existence of lines is cancelled out. Contours only exist in the perception of overlapping areas. By not giving in to the shortcut by which the human brain deceives us in the automatic recognition of objects in a few lines, Mondrian aims at achieving a higher reality. It amounts to a liberation of the mind that reveals a deeper mental reality.

Mondrian was a contemporary of the Danish Gestalt psychologist Edgar Rubin, who revealed the working/tricking of the mind with drawings from which emerged two distinct images, depending on the viewer's perspective. With his figure-ground constellations, such as the famous vase/face drawing, he points out that distinguishing the figure from the background is crucial in the attribution of meaning.

Consequently, the distinction between foreground and background is a matter of perception based on mental assessments that might put us on the wrong track. It is this awareness that *Endgame* shares with cubist artists such as Mondrian and later Geer van Velde. It also presents itself in the geometrical precision on which Beckett insists so meticulously in this play, and by extension in his whole oeuvre. From the very beginning of the play, its universe is measured in Clov's clownish style:

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 128; my translation.



*Clov goes and stands under window left. Stiff, staggering walk. He looks up at window left. He turns and looks at window right. He goes and stands under window right. He looks up at window right. He turns and looks at window left. He goes out, comes back immediately with a small step-ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes six steps (for example) towards window right, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window right, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes three steps towards window left, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, looks out of window. Brief laugh. He gets down, takes one step towards window right, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window right, gets up on it, looks out of window.<sup>24</sup>*

Later, we find Hamm demanding that Clov push his wheelchair so that he can hug the walls of his world as if to measure its size before returning to its very center.

*Endgame* is structured as a two-dimensional painting consisting of lines and colored areas. There are other, textual indications in that direction. The play, after all, both begins and ends with a “[b]rief tableau.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, all the objects in the room (the ashbins and Hamm) are covered with sheets, evoking associations with an artist’s studio. And last but not least, *Endgame*’s title too draws the link to the cubist program in its reference to chess, a game played on a flat surface divided in squares in two colors.

The change of perspective and the preoccupation with geometrical accuracy can also be seen in philosophical reflections of the time. Published in 1943, Sartre’s *L’Être et le Néant* contains an anecdote about a stroll he takes in the park when a man crosses his sight. What is most striking about Sartre’s phenomenological account here is the way he describes his environment in both those situations, this is, when being alone as well as in the encounter with another man. The park is almost geometrically divided into different areas, the distance between himself or the man and the other “objects” on the lawn such as the statue and the chestnut tree is calculated as if he were a surveyor: “the man is there, twenty paces from me, he is turning his back on me. As such he is again two yards, twenty inches from the lawn, six yards from the statue; hence the disintegration of my universe is contained within the limits of this same universe.”<sup>26</sup> We recognize, in other words, in his report an indebtedness to the aesthetics inherent in cubism. The world is apportioned by means of lines and distances against this green surface that is the lawn. Sartre describes how the emergence of a man in his ocular field disrupts the

<sup>24</sup> Beckett: *Dramatic Works*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 91, 154.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre: *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1956, 255–256.

constellation of objects as they appeared before him. As a consequence, his whole perception of this view starts to shift; the background of previously well-measured and fixed objects disintegrates, as the distance between this man and his environment enfolds outside of him.

Nevertheless this new relation of the object-man to the object-lawn has a particular character; it is simultaneously given to me as a whole, since it is there in the world as an object which I can know [...] and at the same time it entirely escapes me. [...] The distance appears as a pure disintegration of the relations which I apprehend between the objects of my universe. It is not I who realize this disintegration; it appears to me as a relation which I aim at emptily across the distances which I originally established between things. It stands as a background of things, a background which on principle escapes me and which is conferred on them from without. Thus the appearance among the objects of my universe of an element of disintegration in that universe is what I mean by the appearance of a man in my universe. [...] The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting.<sup>27</sup>

The world as it appears to one's consciousness may all of a sudden become disrupted because a man crosses one's sight, and re-divides the space from a completely different perspective. He literally cuts through one's environment and rearranges the lines, distances and areas that have composed one's space. In the gaze of the other, one is confronted with the realization that the world is arranged from a position and perspective that is impossible for one to occupy, that is, in other words, entirely other or alien. In this awkward and threatening confrontation, one feels reduced to nothing more than an object. For Sartre, the loss of his self as a result of the look of the other pushes him into the position of object, thus turning him into a passive victim. The hierarchy of foreground and background is unsettled. Or, more precisely, subjectivity undergoes a process of disintegration due to the changed perspective as the subject all of a sudden becomes the object of someone else's gaze. In *Endgame*, this interference by the gaze of the other comes from some small creatures, be it a boy or a flea. Both threaten to destabilize and redefine Hamm's space.

One of the most vehement critics of the impact of the gaze, Sartre felt intimidated by the awareness of being watched. The gaze of the other is considered an intrusion into his personal world. In fact, no less than his self is being threatened under the other's gaze. His phenomenological world is decentralized as it shifts due to the alternating perspective of the other that literally comes into the field and turns him into an object. Sartre understood

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 254–255.



perfectly well that the act of looking is not an innocent contemplative act but radically changes the relation between the subject and the object of viewing. It always connects both poles and thus renegotiates the terms on which one's world is constructed. With regard to the dynamics of the look, Heidegger's influence on Sartre is indisputable. "World," Heidegger said, "is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse transport us into Being."<sup>28</sup> However, for the French existentialist, it never comes to an ocular interaction between the one watching and the one being watched. From the latter's perspective, the other's look always entails a deprivation of his self. Upon meeting the eye of someone else the point of centralization that is crystallized in someone is destabilized, Sartre argues. In the awareness of another point of view from which one is being looked at, one is no longer the center of one's universe. The arrangement of one's world shifts radically from oneself as its center to the one watching and imposing a drastically other perspective on the world. The order as it was always known to one becomes threatened. What Sartre describes philosophically parallels Rubin's psychological figure-ground perception.

Gone is the Cartesian perspectival all-seeing and hence omniscient gaze by which the observer is not affected in the formation of his own subjectivity. If the Western tradition emerging in the wake of Descartes could derive its ontological stability from a self- or ego-conscious driven mind-set, in the twentieth century this view is disrupted and yields to an epistemological suspicion of ocular-based knowledge.

Beckett was fairly well acquainted with Sartre, and showed a lot of enthusiasm for *La Nausée*, though — as James Knowlson adds in his biography — they were not close friends.<sup>29</sup> This may have been effected by the dispute with Sartre's wife Simone de Beauvoir over her refusal to publish the second part of "Suite" ("The End") in *Les Temps Modernes*. Despite what Beckett called this "resounding difference of opinion,"<sup>30</sup> Sartre would nonetheless later suggest to Beckett that he might contribute another piece for his journal. More important than their personal relationship, however, is the influence that Sartre's existentialist thinking exerted on Beckett. In part, *Endgame* can be seen as a theatricalization of the program of the cubist art style and the concomitant destabilization of inner and outer, foreground and background. Shaping the world, additionally, is strongly bound up with the scopic illusions that are at

<sup>28</sup> Qtd. in Martin Jay: *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley, University of California, 1993, 272.

<sup>29</sup> James Knowlson: *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London, Bloomsbury, 1996, 359.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Beckett: *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1941–1956*, Vol. 2, eds. George Craig – Martha Dow Fehsenfeld – Dan Gunn – Lois More Overbeck, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 2011, 47.

play in witnessing a scene. Bram van Velde, just like Hamm, does not mind being blind, or semi-blind, because both paint their inner world. Paraphrasing Hamm, something's "dripping" in their heads, again a term in the play alluding to painting. They have withdrawn from the outer world that continually shifts and disintegrates due to the interference of other humans. What is left is the cubist painting they have turned themselves into, that is, abstract though it may be, as liable to interpretation as the man-object in the background of the lawn-object in Sartre's account. If only one has enough patience while looking at a cubist painting, some figures will eventually appear from the ground: "Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough."<sup>31</sup> Not coincidentally, Hamm utters this hypothesis right after his question to Clov: "We're not beginning to...to... mean something?"<sup>32</sup> Indeed, even amidst their environment of darkness, once the contours and the figures are established in the process (or the fantasy, as Hamm calls it<sup>33</sup>) of being watched, some signification is likely to come up.

Because the ideas behind cubism are very strongly preoccupied with perception, there is an intricate link between seeing and being seen on the one hand and an aesthetics of formalism on the other. In the two-dimensional world of *Endgame*, both these preoccupations come together in the shifting perspectives of blindness and seeing, darkness and light, background and foreground, making the play a time document that expresses the aesthetics of cubism in its own idiosyncratic, Beckettian way.

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<sup>31</sup> Beckett: *Dramatic Works*, 115.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

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# SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE SINIC WORLD

PATRICK ARMSTRONG

## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this essay is to explore how the influence of early Chinese philosophy and Buddhist thought is deeply embedded in Samuel Beckett's later plays. By tracing this affinity from Beckett's early fiction through to his later work, the reader will be able to see That Time (1975), a play pervaded by Eastern thought and tradition, in a new light. Through the consideration of significant sources present in Beckett's extant library — such as Herbert Giles's The Civilisation of China (1911), Louis Laloy's La Musique Chinoise (1910), and Olga Plümacher's Der Pessimismus (1884) — this essay begins to reveal the more entrenched, and previously overlooked, Eastern dimensions of his prose and drama.*

“We should have approached Beckett from the way we learned from the medieval Buddhist thinking in Japan, rather than from the Christian thinking.”<sup>1</sup> After his 1973 production of *Waiting for Godot* (1953), Japanese director and Noh actor Hisao Kanze recognized the reason for its lack of success: an overly Western and Christian approach. By neglecting his own theatrical heritage — his knowledge of Eastern culture, philosophy and drama — he had been unable to illuminate fully the Chinese and Japanese aspects of Beckett's work. With this acknowledgment of failure, however, came the aspiration to reconsider the “medieval Buddhist” aspects of the drama and to try to “produce [...] again”: a most fitting place to begin a discussion of the works of Samuel Beckett, the artist whose “fidelity to failure” famously led him to “try again,” “fail again,” and “fail better.”<sup>2</sup> It will become clear that

<sup>1</sup> Hisao Kanze: *Writings of Hisao Kanze: Vol. 4, Surroundings of Noh Actors*, Tokyo, Heibonsha, 1981, 178, quoted in Yoshiki Tajiri – Mariko Hori Tanaka: Beckett's Reception in Japan, in Mark Nixon – Matthew Feldman (eds.): *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett*, London, Continuum, 2009, 153.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 178; Samuel Beckett: Three Dialogues, in Ruby Cohn (ed.): *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, London, John Calder, 1983, 145; Samuel Beckett: *Worstward Ho*, London, John Calder, 1983, 7.

Kanze had good reason to want the chance to “think it over and [re]produce” a version of Beckett’s work that brought out the striking, though not at first glance obvious, Eastern elements.<sup>3</sup>

Beckett looked to the East as part of an attempt to return to the origins of thought and philosophy. His fascination with epistemology and ancient philosophy led to an engagement with Chinese thought and mythology, bringing to mind Hamm’s love of “the old questions, the old answers” in *Endgame*.<sup>4</sup> This interest in “the old,” the implicitly pre-Christian, is echoed in *That Time*, as the protagonist revises and recalls his, and civilization’s, past events, repeatedly evoking the “old scenes,” the “old rounds,” and the “old breath.”<sup>5</sup> This essay will seek to expand upon John Pilling’s suggestive point that “anyone disappointed of Christian consolation in the way Beckett has been seen to be, is bound to turn (if not for religious satisfaction, at least in the spirit of returning to the origins of thought) to the writings of the pre-Socratic philosophers.”<sup>6</sup> Beckett’s reading of Eastern sources demonstrates an indirect return to the “origins of thought” through Eastern, pre-Christian philosophers, such as Buddha, Lao-Tzu, and Chuang-Tzu.

*Ex Cathedra*, the 1934 review of Ezra Pound’s essay collection *Make It New*, indicates that Beckett was aware of Ernest Fenollosa’s significant essay on the “Chinese Written Character.”<sup>7</sup> In Fenollosa’s comparative study of Chinese signs and poetry, which Pound first published in 1919, he declares: “[T]he Chinese have been idealists, and experimenters in the making of great principles; their history opens a world of lofty aim and achievement, parallel to that of the ancient Mediterranean peoples.”<sup>8</sup> Beckett, too, would become interested in this idealism and in the “lofty aim and achievement” of the Sinic world. In particular, the mystical teachings of Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu seem to have appealed to the theologically disillusioned and philosophically inquisitive author. Two of his closest friends in Paris, the artists André Masson and Georges Duthuit, were fascinated by the kind of early Sinic art, culture, and philosophy that interested Pound and Fenollosa.<sup>9</sup> In *Three Dialogues* (1949), a written debate between Duthuit and Beckett on contemporary art, Duthuit discusses Masson’s

<sup>3</sup> Kanze: *Writings*, 178.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Endgame*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber and Faber, 1986, 110.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett: *That Time*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 388–395.

<sup>6</sup> John Pilling: *Samuel Beckett*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976, 123.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Ex Cathedra*, in *Disjecta*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest Fenollosa – Ezra Pound: *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: An Ars Poetica*, in Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein (eds.): *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*, New York, Fordham University, 2008, 58.

<sup>9</sup> See James Knowlson: *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London, Bloomsbury, 1996, 369–371.

technique of “painting the void, ‘in fear and trembling.’”<sup>10</sup> He then added the significant sentence, which in some ways anticipates Beckett’s artistic oeuvre: “his concern was at one time with the creation of a mythology; then with man, not simply in the universe, but in society; and now ... ‘inner emptiness, the prime condition, according to Chinese esthetics, of the act of painting.’”<sup>11</sup> The parallels that can be drawn between Masson’s movement and Beckett’s own artistic career are intriguing; these range from his quasi-Joycean creation of the mythological Belacqua Shuah in his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (hereinafter *Dream*), to the struggles of solipsistic man in *Murphy* and finally to his increasing fascination with “the prime condition” of “inner emptiness” in the late dramatic works such as *That Time*. The above quotation from *Three Dialogues* highlights Beckett’s awareness of Masson’s affinity with the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, and that the idea of painting, or creating an “inner emptiness,” was crucially associated with a “Chinese esthetic.” Here, Masson’s artistic objective, which aspires to an ideal Buddhist state of “inner emptiness,” has an affinity with Beckett’s “dream of an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving.”<sup>12</sup> This “Chinese esthetic” of emptiness is voiced at the end of *That Time*, as the speaker acknowledges that the narrative is just “another of those old tales to keep the void from pouring in on top of you.”<sup>13</sup>

Two important and relatively overlooked sources, which Beckett read in the late 1920s and early 1930s as he prepared to write *Dream*, significantly shaped the young writer’s early understanding of Eastern thought and mythology. Firstly, the meta-narrator of *Dream* tells “a little story about China,” which is a translation from Louis Laloy’s *La Musique Chinoise*.<sup>14</sup> The mythological tale describes how “Ling-Liün,” a fictional Chinese “minister,” discovered the musical scale in ancient China by cutting “eleven stems” of bamboo to correspond with the notes sung by the male and female phoenix.<sup>15</sup> That Beckett used this translated anecdote to adumbrate his ideal model of the novel is shown by Catherine Laws: “through the Chinese metaphor (and the consequent, idiosyncratic elaboration of analogies with melodic and harmonic structures, intonation and Pythagorean tuning), music is presented as an idealised model of what this novel might aspire towards but cannot achieve.”<sup>16</sup> Despite the important recognition of music as “an idealised model,” however,

<sup>10</sup> Beckett: *Three Dialogues*, 139.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>13</sup> Beckett: *That Time*, 390.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, eds.: Eoin O’Brien – Edith Fournier, Dublin, The Black Cat, 1992, 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Laws: Beckett and Unheard Sound, in Daniela Caselli (ed.): *Beckett and Nothing*, Manchester, Manchester University, 2010, 180.

Laws does not draw attention to the significance of the fact that this exemplar is derived from Chinese mythology (rather than from, say, Greek or Roman, with which Beckett was of course very familiar). Through this assimilation of Laloy's study of Chinese music, Beckett displays an affinity with Chinese thought and mythology, using the myth as a metaphor for a "purely melodic" work of fiction.<sup>17</sup>

A second and perhaps more influential source was Herbert A. Giles's *The Civilisation of China*. Beckett's *Dream Notebook*, a miscellany that included entries from Laloy's idiosyncratic academic text, is particularly illuminating in showing that he almost concurrently studied Giles's history. Although Lidan Lin is one of the only critics to have argued for the influence of Giles's *Civilisation* on Beckett, it was certainly an important source for the young author, broadening his philosophical and cultural scope by exposing him to Sinic culture and early Eastern thought.<sup>18</sup> Certain expressions from Giles's *Civilisation*, such as "rent silk" and "partner of my porridge days," were copied verbatim into the early short story *Echo's Bones*.<sup>19</sup> The inclusion of Giles's peculiar phrases throughout *Dream* and *More Pricks Than Kicks* suggests that the study of Chinese civilization linguistically and imaginatively engaged the young author.

The following sentence in Giles offered an early and significant introduction to Lao-Tzu, the ancient Chinese philosopher and author: "at a very remote day, some say a thousand, others six hundred, years before the Christian era, there flourished a wise man named Lao Tzu [...] understood to mean the Old Philosopher."<sup>20</sup> Over forty years later, this mysterious description of "a wise man" who, significantly for Beckett, predated "the Christian era" remained in his mind, given his clear reference to Lao-Tzu in *That Time* as, "that old Chinaman long before Christ born with long white hair."<sup>21</sup> This identification is confirmed by Antoni Libera, who notes that "during production the author explained that here is meant Lao-Tse [an alternative spelling of Lao-Tzu or Laozi, sometimes translated as 'Old Master']"<sup>22</sup> Critical studies of the play have previously undervalued the significance of this allusion, which indicates a return to the "origins of thought" through early Eastern culture.

<sup>17</sup> Beckett: *Dream*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Lidan Lin: Samuel Beckett's Encounter with the East, *English Studies*, Vol. 91, No. 6, (2010), 634.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Dream Notebook*, ed. John Pilling, Reading, Beckett International Foundation, 1999, 70–76; Beckett: *Echo's Bones*, ed. Mark Nixon, London, Faber and Faber, 2014, 12, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert A. Giles: *The Civilisation of China*, Los Angeles, Indo-European Publishing, 2010, 31–32.

<sup>21</sup> Beckett: *That Time*, 390.

<sup>22</sup> Antoni Libera: Reading *That Time*, in Robin J. David – Lance St. J. Butler (eds.): *Make Sense Who May*, Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe Limited, 1988, 97.



Setting the precedent for Beckett's transfer of "Chinese wisdom into Irish wit," Oscar Wilde wrote a review of Herbert Giles's *Chuang-Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer* (1889) in 1890.<sup>23</sup> Given that Beckett attended the same school and university as Wilde and read Richard Ellmann's biography of the Irish writer, the notion that he had read Wilde's enthusiastic review, *A Chinese Sage*, is far from inconceivable.<sup>24</sup> Comparing Western philosophy with early Eastern thought, Wilde writes: "In fact, Chuang Tzu may be said to have summed up in himself almost every mood of European metaphysical or mystical thought, from Heraclitus down to Hegel. There was something in him of the Quietist also; and in his worship of Nothing he may be said to have in some measure anticipated those strange dreamers of mediaeval days who, like Tauler and Master Eckhart, adored the purum nihil and the Abyss."<sup>25</sup> This suggestive equation of Chuang-Tzu's Taoist thought with "European metaphysics," mystical thought, and Quietism is one that Beckett, given his interest in these schools of thought, is likely to have made.

Giles's writings on Taoism and Chuang-Tzu's conception of "the pure men of old," translated from the *Zhuangzi*, engaged Beckett, just as they had Wilde, and played a crucial role in his philosophical return to Chinese, pre-Christian thought.<sup>26</sup> The importance of Giles's quotation from Chuang-Tzu, a Taoist philosopher and follower of Lao-Tzu of the third and fourth centuries B.C., to Beckett's writing is worthy of substantial reevaluation:

But what is a pure man? The pure men of old acted without calculation, not seeking to secure results. They laid no plans. Therefore, failing, they had no cause for regret; succeeding, no cause for congratulation. And thus they could scale heights without fear; enter water without becoming wet, and fire without feeling hot. The pure men of old slept without dream, and waked without anxiety. They ate without discrimination, *breathing deep breaths. For pure men draw breath from their heels; the vulgar only from their throats.*<sup>27</sup>

In *Dream*, following a "hark back to the liü business," Beckett's meta-narrator directly draws on this passage, "we live and learn, *we draw breath from our heels now, like a pure man*, and we honour our Father, our Mother, and

<sup>23</sup> For a more comprehensive study of Wilde's review, see Joshua McCormack: From Chinese Wisdom to Irish Wit: Zhuangzi and Oscar Wilde, *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Autumn – Winter, 2007), 302–321.

<sup>24</sup> See Mark Nixon – Dirk Van Hulle: *Samuel Beckett's Library*, New York, Cambridge University, 2013, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Oscar Wilde: *A Chinese Sage*, in Hesketh Pearson (ed.): *Essays by Oscar Wilde*, London, Methuen, 1950, 287.

<sup>26</sup> Giles: *The Civilisation of China*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–34.; my emphasis.



Goethe.”<sup>28</sup> By suggesting that Beckett is mocking Goethe’s “pure man,” John Bolin does not acknowledge the significance of its Taoist source, whereas Lidan Lin has more accurately suggested that what Beckett “exhibits here is his clever appropriation of Taoist ethics and his extremely creative conflation of such ethics and his own postmodern ideal.”<sup>29</sup> The source for the Taoist “pure man” has, hitherto, only been identified by Lin. Her assertion that “Beckett imagines himself acting as a Taoist pure man in writing *Dream*, the pure man in this case being the purist writer” provides a new insight into Beckett’s creative intentions.<sup>30</sup> Although her work proposes only an “encounter” between Beckett and the East, this essay argues that Beckett’s engagement with the Sinic world was more profound and abiding. An understanding of Beckett’s use of Chinese sources can be elucidated further if we consider the influence of Chuang-Tzu’s “pure men of old” and Laloy’s “little story about China” alongside one another.

Whilst Laloy’s mythological account of the Chinese invention of music offers the ideal narrative model for *Dream*, Chuang-Tzu’s ancient mysticism provides the foundation for Beckett’s authorial desideratum. The narrator of *Dream* suggests that in order to “write a little book that would be purely melodic,” the characters should “be cast for parts in a liü-liü,” an idea that is echoed by Beckett’s desire for writers and heroines to act like pure men of old.<sup>31</sup> When these two Chinese sources are read in conjunction, Beckett’s literary model begins to unfold: aesthetic works of “purely melodic” prose, in which characters, as well as the authors who create and “cast” them, draw “deep breaths”, act “without calculation,” and fail “with no cause for regret.” Viewed in the new light of Laloy and Giles’s Chinese influence, Beckett’s oeuvre can be read as a comic exploration of man’s failure to achieve these Eastern paragons, as “an art unresponsible of its insuperable indigence.”<sup>32</sup>

Whilst, according to Robert Cushman’s 1976 review, *That Time* is nothing more than “a re-run of *Krapp’s Last Tape* without the props,” there are central aesthetic differences between the two plays.<sup>33</sup> This dismissal of the later play as “a process of refinement but not necessarily enrichment” overlooks Beckett’s movement towards his desired Chinese aesthetic, a dramatic and formal “ablation of desire.” In fact, the removal of props and the refined action of the later work is suggestive of the playwright’s enriching movement towards

<sup>28</sup> Beckett: *Dream*, 178; my emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> John Bolin: *Beckett and the Modern Novel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 2013, 15; Lidan Lin: Chinese Music as a Narrative Model, *English Studies*, Vol. 91, No. 3 (2010), 300.

<sup>30</sup> Lin: *Encounter*, 299.

<sup>31</sup> Beckett: *Dream*, 10. The liü-liü are bells or pipes that form a scale of eleven successive fifths. See Louis Laloy: *La Musique Chinoise*, trans. Laura D. Hawley, Hollywood, W. M. Hawley Publications, 1993, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Beckett: *Three Dialogues*, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Cushman: In a Hellish Half Light, *Observer*, 23 May 1976.

the two Eastern ideal models presented by Giles and Laloy. For instance, the alliterative “Foley’s Folly,” which was changed from his original choice “Maguire’s Folly,” indicates an attempt to create a “purely melodic” prose style like that of a liǔ-liǔ.<sup>34</sup> Krapp is a prime example of a character who has failed to achieve the idealized Quietism of a pure man. The elder Krapp, for instance, admits to seeing that “bony old ghost of a whore” to satisfy his sexual desire, suggesting a failure to lead an ascetic life.<sup>35</sup> This directly contrasts with *That Time*, in which there is “no touching or anything of that nature” between the purer voice of youth and his lover, “no pawing in the manner of flesh and blood.”<sup>36</sup> If the youthful voice represents something closer to Chuang-Tzu’s pure man, then Krapp is an antithetically impure figure. By choosing to act with “calculation” through laying “plans for a less... engrossing sexual life,” the younger Krapp creates his own failure and “misery.”<sup>37</sup> Whilst the younger Krapp may have succeeded in ablating desire in a sexual sense, his very desire to be “known” in the literary world is a failure because he is “seeking to secure results.” Having recorded his failure to be a writer, the futile “getting known,” the older Krapp revealingly describes himself as “drowned in *dreams* and burning to be gone.”<sup>38</sup> The language and imagery here strongly recalls Chuang-Tzu’s description of “pure men.” If Krapp has “drowned,” then he has failed to “enter water without becoming wet”; his deep “dreams” show the inability to sleep “without dream”; and his “burning,” along with his exclamation of “the fire in me now,” demonstrate the impossibility of entering “fire without feeling hot.”<sup>39</sup> In *That Time*, however, the Listener approximates a Quietist, a pure man who remains motionless whilst he draws deep breaths, who avoids “pawing in the manner of flesh and blood,” and who acts without calculation.<sup>40</sup> His past scenes, in contrast to Krapp, who uses recordings to prompt memory, “float up” in an involuntary, Proustian way.<sup>41</sup>

The Taoist idea of pure men “breathing deep breaths [...] from their heels” resonates throughout the later dramatic works. In *That Time*, the breath of the central figure, a pure man of old, is made audible, as the stage directions specify: “Breath: up with growing light, audible throughout silence & open eyes, down to inaudible with fading light for resumption.”<sup>42</sup> Whilst in *Breath*, a play in which the only sound is “an instant of recorded vagitus,” light and

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Beckett: *That Time*, MS 1488/2–3, Samuel Beckett Manuscript Collection at the University of Reading.

<sup>35</sup> Beckett: Krapp’s Last Tape, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 222.

<sup>36</sup> Beckett: *That Time*, 391.

<sup>37</sup> Beckett: *Krapp’s Last Tape*, 218–223, my emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 222, my emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>40</sup> Beckett, *That Time*, 391.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>42</sup> Samuel Beckett: *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, Vol. 1, ed. S. E. Gontarski, New York, Grove, 1999, 375.

breath are again “strictly synchronised,” demonstrating the blending of Manichaeism with the lasting imaginative influence of the deep breaths of Chuang-Tzu’s pure men.<sup>43</sup> In *That Time*, John Pilling and James Knowlson suggest that the effect of the pauses in which the Listener opens his eyes and audibly breathes “is to refocus attention on the somewhat harrowing physical actuality of the old man’s breathing presence.”<sup>44</sup> Through this exploration of Beckett’s engagement with the Taoist idea of a “pure man,” as one who draws “deep breaths,” however, this interpretation can be countered. If the breaths are from the figure’s “throat,” as opposed to his “heels,” then he is indeed a “vulgar” figure, whose “physical actuality” may be interpreted as “harrowing”; however, as the breath is deliberately rendered “audible,” it seems more likely that it is “deep” and from the “heels,” rendering the Listener an “old white” representation of a pure man.<sup>45</sup>

In another passage from Giles that further connects Beckett’s interest in breathing to early Chinese philosophy, Taoism is explained as a way of life that “professes to teach the art of extending life”:

This art would probably go some way towards extending life under any circumstances, for it consists chiefly in deep and regular breathing [...] and finally, as borrowed from the Buddhists, in remaining motionless for some hours a day, the eyes shut, and the mind abstracted as much as possible from all surrounding influences.<sup>46</sup>

In *That Time*, Beckett dramatizes the “art of extending life,” as the “deep and regular” breaths are made audible and the figure remains motionless, though not entirely “abstracted.” The “motionless” nature of the protagonist is explained by Beckett’s Massonic shift towards the “Chinese esthetic” of “inner emptiness.” If *That Time* is in effect a “re-run” of *Krapp’s Last Tape* “without the props,” then it is so because of Beckett’s gradual movement towards an aesthetics of contraction and emptiness. Prefiguring the ending of *Catastrophe*, the Listener’s ambiguous closing smile interrupts the former stillness, which the voice describes as “not a sound only the old breath and the leaves turning,” with a memorable final gesture.<sup>47</sup>

As a philosopher who engaged with, and assimilated into his thinking, both Eastern and Western religion, Arthur Schopenhauer was also crucial to the formation of Beckett as a writer. In particular, the writings on Eastern

<sup>43</sup> Beckett: Breath, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 371.

<sup>44</sup> James Knowlson – John Pilling: *Frescoes of the Skull, The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett*, London, John Calder, 1979, 208.

<sup>45</sup> Beckett: *That Time*, 388.

<sup>46</sup> Giles: *The Civilisation of China*, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Beckett: *That Time*, 395.

thought in *The World as Will and Idea* (1818), which Beckett read closely in 1930 and throughout his lifetime, influenced his breadth and understanding of philosophy. Beckett appreciated Schopenhauer as a philosopher who could be read as a poet, and studied his work for an “intellectual justification of unhappiness” rather than “philosophy.”<sup>48</sup> This “justification,” however, drew heavily on Eastern philosophy and the kind of “medieval Buddhist thinking” that Kanze belatedly observed in *Waiting for Godot*. Dorothea Dauer has convincingly shown that “each point of Buddhist philosophy finds its counterpart bearing a more or less similar connotation in the system of this German philosopher.”<sup>49</sup> *That Time* bears the faint imprint of Schopenhauer’s comparative study of religion, as the “old Chinaman” and “Christ” are syntactically unified, with the voice rewinding through history, from “childhood” to the “womb” to “that old Chinaman.”<sup>50</sup> This reference to Lao-Tzu, which first appears in the margin of the fourth draft, not only expands the temporal range of the play, but also importantly demonstrates a conscious reference to a pre-Christian, philosophical figure from the East.<sup>51</sup>

The publication of *Samuel Beckett’s Library* (2013) shows that Beckett owned and read Olga Plümacher’s *Der Pessimismus*, an “interleaved” copy “filled with translations and summaries” that builds on Schopenhauer’s study of comparative religion.<sup>52</sup> Mark Nixon describes it as “one of the most surprising books in Beckett’s extant library.”<sup>53</sup> Given Beckett’s interest in Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu, however, it is not in fact overly surprising that in early 1938 he took an interest in the first chapter titled “Der Pessimismus im Brahmanismus und Buddhismus.”<sup>54</sup> This opening section distinguishes “being” from “that which should or need not be,” before linking the two religions [Brahmanism and Buddhism] with pessimism, based on the idea that existence is worse than non-existence.<sup>55</sup> In his copy of Plümacher, it appears that Beckett underlined the word “Nichtsein,” or non-existence, indicating an interest in the German philosopher’s claim that it is a preferable condition to existence, whilst also further suggesting his engagement with the concept of non-being that is fundamental to much early Eastern metaphysical thought. These philosophical sources could lead to an alternative interpretation of the

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Beckett: *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, Vol. 1, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 2009, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Dorothea Dauer: *Schopenhauer as Transmitter of Buddhist Ideas*, Berne, Lang, 1969, 35.

<sup>50</sup> Beckett: *That Time*, 390.

<sup>51</sup> Beckett: *That Time*, MS 1477/4, Beckett Manuscript Collection at the University of Reading.

<sup>52</sup> Nixon: *Beckett’s Library*, 152.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>54</sup> Olga Plümacher: *Der Pessimismus in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, Heidelberg, Georg Weiss Verlag, 1888, 18–27.

<sup>55</sup> Nixon: *Beckett’s Library*, 154.

closing smile in *That Time*, as the impending “shroud,” a metaphor for “non-existence,” may well be welcomed by the Listener, who is tormented by the incessant surrounding voices.

One of Beckett’s favourite aphorisms, Arnold Geulincx’s “Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis” (“wherein you have no power, therein you should not will”), finds a close counterpart in Plümacher’s rendering of Buddhism, “since nothingness is all there is, all thirst for knowledge is vain.”<sup>56</sup> Beckett’s study of philosophical works that compared Western religions to those of Buddhism and Taoism resonated with some of his central epistemological and metaphysical inclinations. Plümacher’s text includes Gautama Buddha’s conclusion that “whatever lurked behind multiform existence had to be ‘pure nothingness,’” a line that Beckett underlined.<sup>57</sup> In *That Time*, the darkness, or “pure nothingness,” ominously lurks beyond the floating head, as behind the multiple voices and complexity of the figure’s existence lies the “great shroud billowing in all over.”<sup>58</sup> The shroud constantly threatens to end the narrative, which is, in itself, simply one of the “old tales to keep the void from pouring in on top of you.”<sup>59</sup>

The description of the Listener also resembles iconic images of Lao-Tzu. Knowlson and Pilling suggest that “the inspiration [for the old man] is clearly pictorial, probably a William Blake engraving, and most likely his representation of the Listener’s fellow sufferer, Job.”<sup>60</sup> However, the stage directions that detail the “old white face” and “long flaring white hair” of the protagonist, combined with the allusion to “that old Chinaman,” suggests that Beckett may well have been remembering the hanging scroll painting of “Laozi” that was on display in the British Museum during his time in London. Indeed, there is a notable similarity between the quasi-mythological figure of Lao-Tzu, whose name could be translated as “aged child,”<sup>61</sup> and the temporal construction of *That Time*. The antithetical nature of “aged child” resonates throughout the play, as the Listener cannot distinguish between the voices describing, as confirmed by Beckett, youth (B), maturity (A), and old age (C). Given the paradoxical nature of Lao-Tzu’s name, senescence and time emerge as central themes. Here it is important to acknowledge Beckett’s knowledge of Chinese aesthetics and Zen philosophy, which contribute to the presentation of a cyclical concept of time and existence. Much like the alternating voices, instances of time are difficult to isolate and pinpoint, and merge through utterance: “was that the time or was that another time.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>58</sup> Beckett: *That Time*, 394.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>60</sup> Knowlson–Pilling: *Frescoes*, 206.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Thomas: *The Universal Dictionary of Biography and Mythology*, Vol. 3, New York, Cosimo, [1887] 2013, 1371.

<sup>62</sup> Beckett: *That Time*, 394.

In 1952, Beckett displayed his direct knowledge of Buddhism in his essay *Henri Hayden, homme-peintre*: “Gautama [...] said that one is fooling oneself if one says that ‘I’ exists, but that in saying it does not exist, one is fooling oneself no less.”<sup>63</sup> This pronoun anxiety, which persists in later prose works such as *Company*, is evident in *That Time* as voice C accuses the protagonist of never “being able to say I” to himself.<sup>64</sup> The interesting reconstitution of Gautama’s argument furthers an Eastern reading of the play, as the inability of the protagonist to assert himself grammatically declares its origins in Buddhist existential and grammatical doubt. The First Truth of the Buddha that “existence is suffering” is expressed as the alliterative line, “the womb worst of all,” which immediately precedes the voice of youth’s reference to “that old Chinaman.”<sup>65</sup> This collocation not only suggests Beckett’s awareness of the myth that Lao-Tzu spent eighty-one years in his mother’s womb, but also that the protagonist is the “old Chinaman” reincarnate, a fellow sufferer in “another time another place.”<sup>66</sup>

In 1971, three years before he began writing the play, Beckett was shown “a volume of Zen art that included a few drawings of circles” by Yasunari Takahashi.<sup>67</sup> Beckett’s interest in the Ensō circles, which are symbolic of the idea of “*mushin*,” a state of being without mind, demonstrate an ongoing engagement with Eastern culture and tradition.<sup>68</sup> *That Time* offers an imaginative reconstruction of the Ensō, as the ordering of the three voices of youth, maturity, and old age is suggestive of the cyclical nature of existence. Schopenhauer’s idea that “there can be no beginning nor end to the Universe, neither Cosmogony nor Eschatology” is one of the indirect sources through which Beckett assimilated this Buddhist concept of cyclical time into his late play, which asks “was there any other time but that time.”<sup>69</sup> The unpunctuated prose further suggests that the text is a written reconstruction of a freehand circle of enlightenment, like that of a Zen priest.

With *That Time*, therefore, Beckett moves closer towards the Chinese aesthetic of “inner emptiness.” The speaker’s mysterious final utterance, “gone in no time,” recalls Plümacher and Schopenhauer’s Buddhist emphasis on the transience of existence, whilst the last remaining sounds, “the old breath” and “the leaves turning,” indicate a momentary unification of a “pure man” with nature, and a peculiar acceptance of the “great shroud,” “the void” of

<sup>63</sup> Beckett: *Disjecta*, 146., my translation.

<sup>64</sup> Beckett: *That Time*, 390.

<sup>65</sup> Dauer: *Schopenhauer*, 12; Beckett: *That Time*, 390.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 394.

<sup>67</sup> Yasunari Takahashi: On “Mindlessness”: Beckett, Japan, and the Twentieth Century, in Angela B. Moorjani – Carola Veit (eds.): *Samuel Beckett: Endlessness in the Year 2000*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2001, 38–42.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>69</sup> Dauer: *Schopenhauer*, 30; Beckett: *That Time*, 395.



non-existence. The intention of this argument is to give rise to more extensive studies of Beckett's Sinic world, which can only serve to further enrich our experience of his work. Moreover, Beckett's affinity with Chinese and Japanese culture enables us to place him within a new global context; one that should inspire future Hisao Kanzes to "try again," or indeed "fail again," with their efforts to produce plays that embrace the stirring Eastern philosophical dimensions of Beckett's work.

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PART 2: *BECKETT INFLUENCING*





# “RANDOM DOTINESS”: SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE RECEPTION OF HAROLD PINTER’S EARLY DRAMAS

JONATHAN BIGNELL

## ABSTRACT

*This essay analyzes the significance of Samuel Beckett to the British reception of the playwright Harold Pinter’s early work. Pinter’s first professionally produced play was *The Birthday Party*, performed in London in 1958. Newspaper critics strongly criticized it, and its run was immediately cancelled. Beckett played an important role in this story, through the association of Pinter’s name with a Beckett “brand” which was used in reviews of *The Birthday Party* to sum up what was wrong with Pinter’s play. Both Beckett and Pinter signified obscurity, foreignness and perversity. Rather than theatre, it was broadcasting of their dramas that cemented Beckett’s and Pinter’s public reputations. The BBC Head of Drama, Martin Esslin, backed both writers, and the BBC producer and friend of Beckett’s Donald McWhinnie produced Pinter’s first broadcast play in 1959. Radio, and later television, helped to establish the canonical roles that Beckett and Pinter would later play.*

This essay analyzes how the relationship between Samuel Beckett’s and Harold Pinter’s dramatic work was perceived in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Britain.<sup>1</sup> The essay begins by discussing the premiere London performance of Pinter’s first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*, which was very negatively reviewed by the theatre critics of the London newspapers. At this time, the critics’ power was immense and could turn a theatre production into a dazzling commercial success or make audiences stay away and thus bankrupt its producers. While not all of the reviewers compared Pinter’s play with Beckett’s work, several of them did, and the reference to Beckett was most often used not to praise Pinter but to condemn him. This paper discusses what reference to Beckett meant at this cultural moment. It goes on to argue that it was broadcasting, mainly on radio but then on television, that lifted both Beckett and Pinter into landmarks in the national drama.

<sup>1</sup> Research for this paper was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/P005039/1) as part of the research project “Pinter Histories and Legacies”: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/ftt/research/ftt-Harold-Pinter-Histories-and-Legacies.aspx>.

The connection between the quixotic theatre culture and this liberal but paternalistic broadcasting support-system was a small group of individuals, working within a powerful discourse of public benefit. While the discourses of theatre professionals struggled for a while to assimilate Pinter's work into a recognized category, and they cast around for comparators, a few important broadcasters quickly stepped up to bring Pinter into a cadre of dramatists where Beckett already belonged. Pinter's work was more accessible to television audiences than Beckett's, and there was an increasing divergence between them as discourses around them solidified in the early 1960s.

“FORGET BECKETT”: REVIEWS OF *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

*The Birthday Party*, Pinter's first full-length play, premiered in London on Monday, 19 May 1958, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. This was not the first performance, since the play had been toured to student audiences at Cambridge, and was well-received there and on early visits to Oxford and Wolverhampton. The official Pinter webpage reprints the *Cambridge Review's* response, which called Pinter “a lively and assimilative new talent” whose play “owes much to Ionesco, whose influence on the British theatre may ultimately prove as insidious as it now seems, to those sated with West End dreariness, promising.”<sup>2</sup> This ambivalence continued as *The Birthday Party* was described as both “adroit” but “nihilistic, for no rich areas of significant human experience seem to exist between the sterile level of reality at the opening (cornflakes, fried bread and the stock question ‘Is it nice?’) and the subsequent gaping horror and claustrophobia of a neurotic's world.” One of Oxford's local papers, *The Oxford Mail*, likened the play to the work of Ernest Hemingway and T. S. Eliot in its review, while the *Oxford Times* noted its similarities with the menace and mystery of Kafka.<sup>3</sup> Pinter had already written a short play, *The Room*, commissioned for the opening of the first university drama department in the UK at Bristol University, in May 1957. However, playwriting was an activity he had only recently begun to undertake alongside a moderately successful career as a professional actor. Indeed, it was while Pinter was performing in a touring production of the comedy *Doctor in the House* that he wrote *The Birthday Party*, commissioned by the 27-year-old producer Michael Codron.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Anon.: *The Birthday Party*, *Cambridge Review*, 28 April 1958, [http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/plays\\_bdayparty.shtml](http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/plays_bdayparty.shtml), (accessed 8 November 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Billington: *Fighting Talk*, *The Guardian*, Books section, 3 May 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/may/03/theatre.stage>, (accessed 8 November 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Samantha Ellis: *The Birthday Party*, London 1958, *The Guardian*, 2 April 2003, 4, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/apr/02/theatre.samanthaellis>, (accessed 8 November 2017). The play *Doctor in the House* was adapted from the eponymous comic novel by Richard Gordon (1952), based on his experiences as a young trainee doctor in London.

The London premiere was produced by Codron and David Hall, and was directed by Peter Wood. Wood already had a reputation in the London theatre, having directed a very successful revival of Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* just before starting work on Pinter's play.<sup>5</sup> From various points of view therefore, the production was affected by some of the uncertainties attending any premiere, but Pinter's long experience as a theatre actor, the recent success of his first short play *The Room*, and the experienced personnel surrounding the production militated to some degree against these risks. However, in London the newspaper reviewers strongly criticized the play, and its run was cancelled after only eight performances.

The play is set on the English coast, in the living room of a boarding-house in a small seaside resort. The house's middle-aged owners — Meg, who runs the business, and her husband Petey, a seaside deckchair attendant — let rooms to guests. Two unexpected visitors, Goldberg and McCann, come to the house and terrorize a long-term resident, Stanley, an unemployed concert-party pianist. In the middle of the play, an impromptu birthday party is held for Stanley, and a young woman, Lulu, is assaulted during a party game when all the lights go out. At the end of the play, for reasons that remain obscure, Goldberg and McCann take Stanley away. The play is in three acts, in this single domestic interior setting, with dialogue that appears demotic and desultory, but which hints at powerful and violent emotions that threaten to break through its banal surface.

The critic at *The Daily Telegraph*, William A. Darlington, wrote that having recently been to see performances in Russian at Sadler's Wells theatre, he "had looked forward to hearing some dialogue I could understand. But it turned out to be one of those plays in which an author wallows in symbols and revels in obscurity. [...] The author never got down to earth long enough to explain what his play was about, so I can't tell you."<sup>6</sup> Darlington then described the seaside setting and the characters, all of whom except Petey he called "mad," whether from "thwarted maternity" in Meg's case or "nymphomania" in Lulu's. So, the play was being criticized for not having an evident topic or argument, and for the lack of coherent psychology in its characters, whose actions thus seemed irrational. There was action on stage (distinguishing the play from the inaction that had puzzled Beckett's first audiences for *Waiting for Godot*), and Darlington recognized the sinister quality of Goldberg and McCann that would go on to be the play's most remarked feature. But the critic could not assess the significance of the play, because he was expecting a message in it that he did not find.

<sup>5</sup> Billington: *Fighting Talk*.

<sup>6</sup> William A. Darlington: *Mad Meg and Lodger*, *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 1958, 10.

Milton Shulman of the *Evening Standard* complained that witnessing this play resembled an attempt “to solve a crossword puzzle where every vertical clue is designed to put you off the horizontal,” and he predicted, “It will be best enjoyed by those who believe that obscurity is its own reward.”<sup>7</sup> He wondered whether it was a comedy but decided that it was “not funny enough.” Derek Granger, in the *Financial Times*, wrote: “Harold Pinter’s first play comes in the school of random dottiness deriving from Beckett and Ionesco and before the flourishing continuance of which one quails in slack-jawed dismay.”<sup>8</sup> Granger saw Beckett and Ionesco as reference-points that his readership would recognize, but from whom he expected his readers to recoil. What he most disliked was the sense that the play had no apparent point to make: “The message, the moral, and any possible moments of enjoyment, eluded me. Apart from a seaside ticket-collector and a bare-legged floozy, all the characters seemed to me to be in an advanced state of pottiness or vitamin deficiency, and quite possibly both at once.” Granger’s was not the only review to compare Pinter to Beckett, and Beckett played an important role in this story not so much by a direct relationship as by the association of Pinter’s name with a known Beckett “brand.” References to Beckett were explicitly used in reviews of *The Birthday Party* to sum up what was wrong with it. *The Guardian’s* reviewer, identified as “MWW,” complained that

although the author must have explained his play to the cast, he gives no clues to the audience [...] What [it all] means, only Mr Pinter knows, for as his characters speak in non sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings, they are unable to explain their actions, thoughts or feelings. If the author can forget Beckett, Ionesco and Simpson, he may do better next time.<sup>9</sup>

Both Beckett and Pinter, at this historical moment, were shorthand for obscurity, foreignness, and perversity.<sup>10</sup>

There was a British theatre culture strongly influenced by continental European writing, alternative to the British tradition embodied by Terence Rattigan’s or John Whiting’s plays, and the major London productions just preceding *The Birthday Party* included Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in 1955 and Ionesco’s *The Lesson* and *The Bald Prima Donna* in 1956, each written by authors based in Paris. The other key comparator is John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, first performed in 1956, which became the paradigm for

<sup>7</sup> Milton Shulman: Sorry Mr Pinter, You’re Just Not Funny Enough, *Evening Standard*, 20 May 1958, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Derek Granger: Puzzling Surrealism of *The Birthday Party*, *Financial Times*, 20 May 1958, 3.

<sup>9</sup> MWW: The Birthday Party, *The Guardian*, 21 May 1958, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Dan Rebellato: *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama*, London, Routledge, 1999, 147.

gritty, "kitchen sink" drama that featured young, frustrated and entrapped characters in down-at-heel domestic settings. While *The Birthday Party* was not compared explicitly to Osborne's play, Pinter and the other writers later termed the "Angry Young Men" or the "New Wave" benefited from an expectation of experiment and challenge.

The other plays that the reviewers of *The Birthday Party* would mainly have seen in 1958 were much like those in which Pinter appeared as a professional actor in a touring theatre company. Agatha Christie's country house murder mystery *The Mousetrap* opened in 1952 and played to full houses for decades thereafter. In 1956 it was another play set in a well-to-do country house, Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden*, that was the most successful production in London.<sup>11</sup> In 1958 Agatha Christie had two more plays on the London stage, *The Verdict* and *The Unexpected Guest*, both of which dramatized the moral struggle of middle class characters who have to murder invalid spouses to escape domestic entrapment. Structurally, if not in its language and rhythm, Pinter's play looked in some ways like well-crafted plays by Somerset Maugham and Terence Rattigan. It is set in a room and features a household whose family structures, domestic balance of power and relationship with outsiders are used to work through ideas about hierarchies of class, race and gender, and the condition of post-war British society. In 1958, critics were unsure whether Pinter was one of those writers aping the European avant-garde's critique of the communicative potential of language and eschewing moral and psychological pronouncements. But they were also unsure whether the victimization and abduction of Stanley from a grubby boarding-house was a version of the tense, domestic crime story genre, albeit one that lacked either jokes or plot resolution. Pinter's biographer, Michael Billington, sums up the contemporary reactions to the play by calling it "gloriously uncategorizable."<sup>12</sup>

The first performance had been on a Friday, and Pinter read the reviews published the next morning. He and his wife, the actress Vivien Merchant, left London and went to a country village in the Cotswolds. They bought the Sunday newspapers next morning, and fortunately these contained a single enthusiastic review by the influential critic Harold Hobson in the *Sunday Times*. He had been to the Thursday matinee, where there were seven other people in the audience, one of whom was Pinter himself. Hobson defended the play at length:

<sup>11</sup> Lib Taylor: *Early Stages: Women Dramatists 1958–68*, in T. Griffiths – M. Llewellyn-Jones (eds.): *British and Irish Women Dramatists since 1958*, Buckingham, Open University, 1993, 9–25.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Billington: *Harold Pinter*, London, Faber, 2007, 86.



Pinter, on the evidence of his work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London. [...] The influence of unfavourable notices on the box office is enormous: but in lasting effect it is nothing. *Look Back in Anger* and the work of Beckett both received poor notices the morning after production. But that has not prevented these two very different writers, Mr Beckett and Mr Osborne, from being regarded throughout the world as the most important dramatists who now use the English tongue. The early Shaw got bad notices; Ibsen got scandalously bad notices. Mr Pinter is not merely in good company, he is in the very best company.<sup>13</sup>

Hobson credits the play with holding the audience's attention by being "theatrically interesting" because it is "witty" and its "plot, which consists, with all kinds of verbal arabesques and echoing explorations of memory and fancy, of the springing of a trap, is first rate." Hobson compares its "atmosphere of delicious, impalpable and hair-raising terror" to Henry James's 1898 story *The Turn of the Screw*: "The fact that no one can say precisely what it is about, or give the address from which the intruding Goldberg and McCann come, or say precisely why it is that Stanley is so frightened of them is, of course, one of its greatest merits. It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies."<sup>14</sup>

#### RADIO: THE NATIONAL THEATRE OF THE AIR

Further theatre productions of *The Birthday Party* were mounted, and while Pinter remained controversial, his reputation grew. But British broadcasting played a key role in supporting both Beckett's and Pinter's work and changing the meanings of their "brands" from elite bamboozlement to widely-recognized cultural reference points. BBC radio had already commissioned Pinter's first broadcast play *A Slight Ache* before *The Birthday Party*'s disastrous premiere, on the recommendation of Beckett's actor friend Patrick Magee.<sup>15</sup> BBC radio and ITV television were in the vanguard of establishing the canonical roles that Beckett and Pinter would go on to play. The national BBC radio service made Beckett's work accessible beyond a London-based or academic audience constituency. His 1957 play for radio, *All That Fall*, was broadcast before Pinter's *Birthday Party* was staged, and BBC had broadcast a reading of an extract from Beckett's *From An Abandoned Work* in 1957 and radio versions of extracts from his novel *Malone Dies* in 1958. BBC

<sup>13</sup> Harold Hobson: *The Screw Turns Again*, *Sunday Times*, 25 May 1958, 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Chignell: *British Radio Drama and the Avant-garde in the 1950s*, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2016), 649–664.

radio adaptations of theatre plays and new commissions for radio occurred throughout both Beckett's and Pinter's careers, enshrining them in a canon of significant twentieth-century playwrights. Ten years earlier, William Haley, Director General of the BBC, sent a memo to the Director of Home Broadcasting. It announced that program policy

rests on the community being regarded as a broadly based cultural pyramid slowly aspiring upwards. This pyramid is served by three main Programmes, differentiated but over-lapping in levels and interest, each Programme leading on to the other, the listener being induced through the years increasingly to discriminate in favour of the things that are more worth-while. At any given moment, each Programme should be slightly ahead of its public, but never so much as to lose their confidence.<sup>16</sup>

The problem Haley recognized was that the BBC's representation of British society did not coincide with the actual structure of society. While the BBC's pyramid image of taste was a way of expressing aspirational ideals, it misrepresented national taste as it actually existed.

In the 1950s, radio was the dominant domestic media technology. Following the BBC's success in providing relatively impartial news and popular entertainment during the Second World War, the Corporation entered the post-war period with confidence. Britain was changing, with peacetime reconstruction being followed by a consumer boom in the 1950s. Key consumer durables (cars, washing machines, refrigerators) became widely available, and sales of television sets were boosted by the BBC's broadcast of Queen Elizabeth's Coronation in 1953. It became apparent to the BBC hierarchy that British culture was changing rapidly, and there was much discussion of the nature of change, and the proper response of the largest, oldest and most respected broadcasting organization in the world. The BBC changed the character of its radio services in peacetime, introducing the Home Service and Light Programmes in 1945 and the Third Programme in 1946. The Home Service was a general, mass audience channel broadcasting news, drama, entertainment, and music. The Light Programme was based around popular music and comedy. The Third Programme was intended to broadcast the best in arts and culture, including opera, classical music and both canonical and newly-commissioned drama, and the Third was where Beckett and Pinter's work appeared.<sup>17</sup>

Val Gielgud, Head of Drama at the BBC from 1934 to 1963, pursued a policy that broadcasting should present the classics every few years, regularly putting

<sup>16</sup> William Haley: Home Broadcasting Policy, memo to B. E. Nicolls, Director of Home Broadcasting, 15 March 1948, Caversham, BBC Written Archives Centre, cited in Ernest Simon, Baron of Wythenshawe: *The BBC from Within*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1953, 80.

<sup>17</sup> Kate Whitehead: *The Third Programme: A Literary History*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1989, 140.

work by Shakespeare, Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw on radio or television alongside dramatizations of canonical novels by Jane Austen and George Eliot, for example. The stifling of new, experimental or foreign drama that this policy produced was relieved by the creation of the Third Programme, whose output was strongly influenced by the appointment of Donald McWhinnie as Gielgud's deputy in 1953, working with Michael Bakewell and Barbara Bray to commission and produce drama scripts.<sup>18</sup> Later, when Gielgud stepped down, he was replaced by Martin Esslin, who had just produced his book on the Absurd which linked and praised Beckett and Pinter.<sup>19</sup> When taken to lunch by Gielgud, Esslin reported that Gielgud told him, "I hate Brecht, I hate Beckett, I hate Pinter. But I know what my duty is. That's why I've appointed you to deal with these people."<sup>20</sup> Bakewell, Bray, Esslin, and McWhinnie were supporters of the new drama of the period, especially Beckett and Pinter, with interests in experimental uses of the radio medium,<sup>21</sup> and a significantly different attitude began to prevail after Gielgud retired.

*All That Fall* was directed by McWhinnie and broadcast on the Third Programme on 13 January 1957, featuring Patrick Magee. The French version of *Endgame, Fin de Partie*, was broadcast on 2 May 1957, produced by Bakewell, using the same cast as the Royal Court Theatre's world premiere of the play three weeks previously, including Jean Martin and Roger Blin, with Jacques Brunius as a narrator. Beckett's *Embers* was broadcast on 24 June 1959, directed by McWhinnie, with Magee and Jack MacGowran. Shortly afterwards, on 29 July 1959, BBC broadcast Pinter's first play for radio, *A Slight Ache*, directed by McWhinnie and featuring Maurice Denham, Pinter's wife Vivien Merchant, and Pinter himself (under the pseudonym David Baron). Pinter's *A Night Out* was directed by McWhinnie for a Third Programme broadcast of 1 March 1960 and repeated later that month. Beckett's version of the French New Wave writer Robert Pinget's *The Old Tune (La Manivelle)* was produced by Bray and broadcast on 23 August 1960, with Beckett's collaborators Magee and MacGowran appearing again. Pinter's *The Dwarfs*, written for radio and produced by Bray, was on 2 December that year. It was BBC radio that first presented Beckett's *Endgame* on 22 May 1962, in a version adapted and produced by Bakewell and a cast that included Maurice Denham and Donald Wolfitt. Beckett's *Words and Music*, with music by John Beckett, was produced by Bakewell and featured Magee and Felix Felton. Its first Third

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Esslin: *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1961.

<sup>20</sup> Chignell: *British Radio Drama*, 653.

<sup>21</sup> Everett Frost: *Fundamental Sounds: Recording Samuel Beckett's Radio Plays*, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (1991), 361–376; Jonathan Kalb: *The Mediated Quixote: The Radio and Television Plays and Film*, in J. Pilling (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1994, 124–144; Donald McWhinnie: *The Art of Radio*, London, Faber, 1959.

Programme broadcast was on 13 November 1962. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was broadcast in an abridged version in a season of programs showcasing the cultural highlights of the 1950s on 5 February 1962, with Andrew Sachs and Nigel Stock, produced by Robin Midgley. Pinter's *The Caretaker* was broadcast in the same season, on 13 April, and his play *The Collection* was broadcast a total of three times that year, beginning on 12 June 1962, directed by Cedric Messina and featuring performances by Pinter, Vivien Merchant and Alan Bates. This very distinguished record of Beckett and Pinter on radio continued throughout their lives and beyond, with personnel who comprised a cadre of Britain's finest stage actors, as well as directors and production staff who had privileged relationships with the authors and intimate knowledge of their work.

But during the 1950s the mass audience for radio peaked and fell away, partly due to the rise of television. Changes in BBC policy attempted to address changes in British culture, including discourses about taste and the arts. BBC undertook research into its audiences, not so much to gain quantitative ratings information as to probe the audience's thoughts and desires. The BBC sought to put itself at the center of national life, both reflecting what were seen as the central movements in national politics and culture, and projecting its notion of the ideal form of British society by the selections and omissions of content for its three domestic radio services, and their targeting of particular audience groups. The roles of Pinter and Beckett are in some ways indices that trace the assumptions behind the BBC's intentions, and the contradictions between reflecting society and projecting a vision of the nation beset its executives. A BBC audience report on a reading of Beckett's novel *Molloy* in 1958 demonstrates this problem:

sharp divisions of opinion characterised the response of the sample audiences, ranging from intense disgust to great admiration and excitement, with a substantial proportion of listeners wavering between the two extremes, several of them confessing themselves uncertain of their critical judgement, reduced almost to incoherence when confronted by Beckett.<sup>22</sup>

There were two pressures affecting BBC services. One was the desire to address the whole populace, and thus legitimate the BBC monopoly and fight off commercial radio. This led to increasing anxieties about the loss of youth and working-class audiences during the period, and decisions to provide mass entertainment broadcasting. The other pressure was the commitment to preserve the educative and enlightening policies of the pre-war era when the

<sup>22</sup> Audience Research Report on *Molloy* and *From An Abandoned Work*, 14 January 1958, Caversham, BBC Written Archives Centre, R/9/7/37.

BBC had been led by its paternalistic and moralistic first Director General, Lord Reith. The Third Programme was envisaged as an elite service which sought to fight against popularization, Americanization and mass culture and to expand the audience for high literary and musical culture in its English and (mainly West) European forms.<sup>23</sup> However, the Third Programme's listenership never reached the 10 percent share of the national audience that was originally intended.

#### TELEVISION: ROOM FOR PINTER

Pinter's first television play was a version of *The Birthday Party* made by Associated-Rediffusion, a commercial television company that broadcast to the London region and contributed to the ITV (Independent Television) channel. ITV was a national network with different companies based in regional areas of the country. These franchise holders supplied programs for their own local audiences and also competed to place programs on the national ITV schedule. While BBC had been broadcasting television since 1936 (interrupted by war from 1939–45), the ITV channel was launched only in 1955, but rapidly became popular for its entertainment programs. However, its remit to produce a full spectrum of genres including original and adapted drama was very similar to BBC's, and the wealthier companies holding regional franchises (like Associated-Rediffusion [A-R], ABC and Granada) were keen to demonstrate their cultural credentials by making prestige drama. A-R's producer Peter Willes read *The Birthday Party* and invited Pinter to meet him, greeting him with the words: "How dare you?" When Pinter looked puzzled by this remark, Willes explained: "I've read your bloody play and I haven't had a wink of sleep for four nights."<sup>24</sup> A-R commissioned a television version of *The Birthday Party* and assigned the highly skilled director Joan Kemp-Welch to the task. She was a former actress and one of the few women directors working in British television, and she made a great success of the play. It was broadcast on the national ITV network on 22 March 1960, from 9.35–11.05 pm, in the regular series *Play of the Week*, when it was watched by an audience of 11 million.<sup>25</sup>

Both ITV and BBC could draw on a pool of star performers from stage productions, usually in London, for plays that had gained significant public profile through featuring in upmarket broadsheet newspapers and in radio and television arts broadcasting. Stage productions of the plays were seen only by a tiny sector of the British population, but broadcasts — on the BBC's

<sup>23</sup> Richard Hoggart: *The Uses of Literacy*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1957, 238–241.

<sup>24</sup> Ellis: *The Birthday Party*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Billington: *Harold Pinter*, 110.

Third Programme on radio, television versions and coverage on late-evening discussion programs (like BBC's *Late Night Line-Up*) as well as fully realized productions of the plays — massively increased the reach of both Pinter's and Beckett's work. Pinter and Beckett were packaged in 1960 among a group of experimental dramatists — coming from both the European-influenced avant-garde and also the emerging discourse of gritty British realism. The BBC planned to produce Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Doris Lessing's *The Truth about Billy Newton*, N. F. Simpson's *One Way Pendulum*, and Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen* in their upcoming schedule of drama production that year.<sup>26</sup> Each of these was a theatre play that would be adapted for television.

Using theatre authors and adapting theatre texts provided readily available television material that had already been proven in either subsidized theatre, London's West End theatre, or popular touring repertory theatre. This rationale underlay the television broadcast of both "classics" from the British theatre canon (by Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, or Oscar Wilde, for example) and also "middlebrow" plays like murder mysteries. It was only later in the 1960s that BBC forged a successful relationship with Pinter for screen versions of his plays, which appeared in its established drama series such as *Theatre 625* or *Theatre Night* on the minority channel BBC2. Until 1965 it was on the commercial ITV channel, rather than BBC, that Pinter's theatre work was produced. The *Television Playhouse* series showed Pinter's *The Room*, made by the ITV franchise holder for northern England, Granada, and screened on 5 October 1961. Pinter's *The Collection* was another A-R production for ITV, broadcast on 11 May 1961, and Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* was produced by Granada and shown on ITV on 10 August 1961. When A-R screened *The Lover* on ITV on 28 March 1963, the dramatization won the Prix Italia international prize for television drama. Pinter's *A Night Out* was screened by another ITV company, ABC, for its *Armchair Theatre* episode of 24 April 1964. Pinter's work became relatively familiar to ITV's national audience.

The new ITV channel had been immediately successful at drawing and holding larger shares of the popular audience than BBC, and it was in entertainment (rather than original authored drama) that ITV had the lead. ITV captured each of the top ten positions in the audience ratings nearly every week in the late 1950s and 1960s. One justification for the BBC's role, and to some extent an excuse for its poor audience ratings, was that the BBC provided patronage for drama writers, supplied difficult and experimental dramatic work for a small but socially powerful niche audience, and protected the national heritage of theatrical excellence. For ITV to beat BBC, partly though screening

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Bignell: *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays*, Manchester, Manchester University, 2009, 129.



Pinter's work on *Play of the Week* and *Television Playhouse*, was politically advantageous for the commercial network because it was repeatedly criticized for screening too many undemanding programs like quiz shows and imported Western series. The commissioning of original dramas by Pinter, Beckett and other theatre writers, and adaptations of their theatre plays, advertized theatre itself and supported it as a national cultural institution.

BBC's first television production of Beckett's work was *Waiting for Godot* on Monday, 26 June 1961, and an Audience Report was produced.<sup>27</sup> It attracted only 5 percent of the UK population, compared to 22 percent of the population who were watching ITV instead. The Reaction Index for the play (a measure of appreciation scored out of 100) was 32, well below the average of 66 for plays transmitted from London in the first quarter of 1961. The BBC audience survey quoted some of the viewers' opinions of the play: "the whole thing was much too abstract for my taste" and "a lot of fatuous nonsense," for example. One viewer declared "I'm no Royal Courtier praising the Emperor's new clothes," clearly aware of Beckett's significance as a theatre dramatist and making reference to the Royal Court Theatre's reputation for introducing British social realism and European drama to London audiences. Unlike Beckett's, Pinter's work could be assimilated as drama about entrapping domesticity, a form deriving from the Naturalistic style of 1950s British theatre that became dominant in television drama's *mise-en-scène*.<sup>28</sup> Beckett's plays were still framed in 1961 as abstract and obscure, but by this time Pinter's work on ITV television had gained a popular audience that Beckett's never achieved.

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<sup>27</sup> Audience Research Report on *Waiting for Godot*, 26 June 1961, BBC Written Archives Centre, R/9/7/52.

<sup>28</sup> Raymond Williams: *Television, Technology and Cultural Form*, London, Fontana, 1974, 56.

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# SAMUEL BECKETT'S LEGACIES IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S LATER PLAYS

MARIKO HORI TANAKA

## ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses the post-traumatic subjects in Caryl Churchill's later plays that foreshadow apocalyptic catastrophes. Reflecting the legacy of Samuel Beckett, Churchill's plays are set in a post-World War II socio-political reality where her characters are trapped in traumatic conditions, and their schizophrenic speech expresses a mad dystopia. Particularly in her recent plays such as *Here We Go* (2015) and *Escaped Alone* (2016), her characters seldom speak full sentences, and their lines are more fragmentary than ever. Pauses and silences dominate their conversations. They, like the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, are compelled to speak or say something, as if words or language games can fill the silence or the void. From such traumatic language arises not just the post-traumatic condition of living in the present socio-political reality, but also the "pre-traumatic syndrome" of the future annihilation of human beings and the death of the earth.*

## THE HORROR OF SOCIO-POLITICAL REALITY

Theodor Adorno, in his analysis of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, explains that the play alludes to "the end of the world"<sup>1</sup> he and his contemporaries experienced after the Second World War where "everything, including a resurrected culture, was destroyed, although without its knowledge. In the wake of events which even the survivors cannot survive, mankind vegetates, crawling forward on a pile of rubble, denied even the awareness of its own ruin."<sup>2</sup> Beckett reminds us of the possible annihilation of the human species and destruction of the earth, which we usually repress and ignore. Revealing such repressed horror in us in the unique style of comic irony is the very feature that is explored today by Caryl Churchill.

<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno: *Towards an Understanding of Endgame*, in Bell Gale Chevigny (ed.): *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1969, 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

Features that Beckett and Churchill have in common can be found in what Adorno terms “the violence of the unutterable”<sup>3</sup> or “the language of the no-longer-human”<sup>4</sup> that can be characterized as expressions of silence, negations, and estrangement. As Adorno contends, “Only in silence can the name of the catastrophe be pronounced,”<sup>5</sup> silence is often the only way to express the traumatic fear of a disaster. Ihab Hassan, in *The Literature of Silence*, similarly illustrates this feature, saying “The powers of Dionysos, which civilization must repress, threaten at these times to erupt with a vengeance. In the process, energy may overwhelm order; language may turn into a howl, a cackle, a terrible silence.”<sup>6</sup> As Adorno refers to Beckett’s “reduction of man to animality”<sup>7</sup> as a feature of the absurd in “the atomic age,”<sup>8</sup> Hassan regards what happened in “Dachau and Hiroshima” as “turn[ing] men into things; under its pressure, the metamorphosis of the human form is downward, toward the worms of Beckett.”<sup>9</sup> If we think of both Beckett and Churchill’s descriptions of the degradation of the human species and of their metaphorical depictions of non-humans, it is natural to associate them with the socio-political reality of the atomic age.

Criticisms such as Adorno’s and Hassan’s were in fact shared by many people in the Cold War era when the nuclear arms race intensified, and atomic annihilation did not seem to be unimaginable. Frank Kermode remarks, “In the autumn of 1965, when I gave the lectures which make up *The Sense of an Ending* [...] The Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of President Kennedy were quite recent events, the Cold War remained very cold, and words like ‘megadeath’ were common currency.”<sup>10</sup> Kermode then says “that this word does not appear in the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) may hint at a change of mood, a lessening, however, temporary, of apocalyptic anxiety after that time.”<sup>11</sup> We now know much about Chernobyl and Fukushima, but apocalyptic fear is given less expression today than fifty years ago, and the reality of megadeath seems to be lost in our imagination. But we acknowledge that if a nuclear war or explosion happened on a large scale, there would be no future for the human species. The end of human beings or the death of the earth is no longer a fantasy, and proliferation of crises like environmental destruction, digital control over our lives, the

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>6</sup> Ihab Hassan: *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller & Samuel Beckett*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1967, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Adorno: *Towards an Understanding of Endgame*, 89.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>9</sup> Hassan: *The Literature of Silence*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Kermode: *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*, Oxford, Oxford University, 2000, 181.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 181.

collapse of the capitalist economy, and anti-immigration policies could be accelerating the possible annihilation of the earth. Today, our lives are often brutally imposed on by what Slavoj Žižek calls “multiple versions of external intrusions” that could easily “destroy the symbolic texture of the subject’s identity.”<sup>12</sup> Those who are victimized by repeated external interruptions such as war, terror, natural disasters, lack of food and medicine, poverty, or other violence are physically wounded, mentally traumatized, and emotionally hurt. Žižek calls such victims “‘post-traumatic’ subjects.”<sup>13</sup> Churchill, in her plays, warns of such an apocalyptic time as ours through her characters, who are inflicted with trauma caused by multiple versions of external intrusions. The next section will discuss how Churchill depicts such post-traumatic subjects in this atomic age in her later works.

#### CHURCHILL'S POST-TRAUMATIC SUBJECTS

In her discussion of Churchill, Elin Diamond, who finds some similarities between Churchill and Beckett, contends, “Penning her first post-*Godot* play as early as 1958, she [Churchill] inherits the innovations of post-nuclear absurdism and takes historical and psychic fragmentation as a given.”<sup>14</sup> Churchill’s characters, trapped in traumatic conditions, reveal the fear in the way we express the unspeakable. In an extreme case, it becomes incoherent, illogical, and even meaningless, but through such traumatic and schizophrenic speech can be expressed a mad dystopia, as described in Mrs Jarrett’s monologues in *Escaped Alone*.

Even the dialogues that sound normal in Churchill’s recent plays, such as *Here We Go*<sup>15</sup> and *Escaped Alone*, seldom consist of full sentences and are fragmentary. Pauses and silences, or in other words, emptiness, dominate them. At the same time, her characters, like the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, are compelled to say something as if words or language games can fill the silence or the void. In the first funeral party scene of *Here We Go*, for example, the mourners’ superficial conversations provide the audience with little information, from which are revealed the deceased’s last days with

<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek: *Living in the End Times*, London – New York, Verso, 2011, 292.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>14</sup> Elin Diamond: Beckett and Caryl Churchill along the Möbius Strip, in Linda Ben-Zvi – Angela Moorjani (eds.): *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All*, Oxford, Oxford University, 2008, 288.

<sup>15</sup> *Here We Go* consists of three independent scenes. Fragmentary speech is used in the first scene, a party after a funeral where ten mourners exchange short lines. The second scene consists of ten dead people’s monologues and a long speech by one dead person, while the last scene is a mime by an old ill person who is repeatedly dressed, undressed and has his nightclothes put on him by a carer, which is reminiscent of Beckett’s *...but the clouds...*

dementia and the lack of admiration for his honorable life in his younger days. Their condolences sound meaningless, or even convey malice in their lack of memories of the deceased. The second scene of this play, particularly the latter half focusing on the dead person's speech, is more like Beckett: the person, no longer alive but still hanging on to this world, wonders where he or she is stuck, pondering whether hell exists now when the real world for the living is hellish. The whole speech by this person is spoken very fast, as if the character is unable to stop, which resembles Beckett's Mouth in *Not I* or the three characters in *Play*. In *Escaped Alone*, a more realistic play — in the sense that its setting is a friendly gathering of four women who chat over tea in a small British middle-class town — each of the women, in the middle of their conversation, gives an inner monologue that is cut into the play and spoken while the other women are either in tableau or hidden in a dark space. The inner monologue of Mrs Jarrett, one of the four, is spoken on a darkened stage, alone, separate from the tea gathering scenes; the monologue scene is inserted after each tea scene, and there are seven scenes of Mrs Jarrett's speech, which reflects Churchill's dystopian, apocalyptic view of the world's future.

As early as in such works as *The Skriker* (1994) and *Far Away* (2000), Churchill inserted similar dystopian apocalyptic fantasy into her fragmented dialogue. Her later dramatic works reveal the danger of apocalyptic annihilation caused by the indifference of some political leaders toward a future world controlled by men. Her *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006), for example, satirizes George W. Bush and Tony Blair, who pushed for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, by depicting their intimate relationship as one of homosexual love. This is a two-man play in which a tyrant (the American president), who boasts about his intervention in other countries' civil wars, disgusts his lover (the British prime minister), who, after emotional turmoil, leaves him in the end. If this play is about top world leaders, then *Escaped Alone* is about four old women who have never been nor ever will be in such a spotlight. However, the four women sitting in chairs facing the audience look just like "a sexually reversed photo of world leaders. Instead of a crowd of men and Angela Merkel in a trouser suit, you see a host of women. And David Cameron in a skirt."<sup>16</sup> The topics of their conversations, like those of world leaders, cover, even though there are only slight references in their changing subjects, issues ranging from the deterioration of the countryside to ethnic conflicts, to bombings from drones — all the socio-political reality of our time.

<sup>16</sup> Susannah Clapp: *Escaped Alone* review – small talk and everyday terror from Caryl Churchill, *The Guardian*, 31 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jan/31/escaped-alone-caryl-churchill-review-royal-court> (accessed 11 July 2016).

The title of this play, *Escaped Alone*, is taken from the epilogue of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*,<sup>17</sup> which quotes from the Book of Job: "I only am escaped alone to tell thee,"<sup>18</sup> as seen in Churchill's words of dedication. In *Moby Dick*, this quotation suggests that Ishmael is the only survivor of the attack of a white whale, whose mission is to narrate the story of Ahab, the captain of the whaler he was on. The passage emphasizes the importance of passing on knowledge of the apocalyptic disaster to posterity. Churchill's four elderly women, like the four messengers who one by one visit Job at the dinner with his children and tell him "I only am escaped alone to tell thee,"<sup>19</sup> disclose problems that each one has within her mind. In a way, each of the women, as a kind of survivor, has a trauma from her encounter with an unknown/partially disclosed incident in the past. Their traumas, mostly expressed in the form of an inner monologue, are exposed to the audience in the theater. Chris Wiegand contends that their monologues are "written to be direct address rather than soliloquies."<sup>20</sup> Hence, the audience are entrusted to pass on to future generations the warnings of possible disaster in the future, as well as the horror of the socio-political reality that has caused individual traumas.

Three of the four women in *Escaped Alone*, Sally, Vi and Lena, are friends from the old days and they get together in Sally's backyard for the first time after a long absence. The play is reminiscent of Beckett's *Come and Go*, in which some hidden secrets are not always shared by all three women but only by two of them, and the audience simply understands through their minimalistic exchanges that there is a terrible secret within each of them.<sup>21</sup> The hidden traumas that afflict each woman are revealed as the play progresses, but the incident which caused the trauma is never clarified. It only becomes clear in the case of Vi; she was imprisoned for her husband-killing. However, whether it was a murder she intended or just self-defense is never known; Sally, who happened to be an eye-witness of Vi's murder, thinks that it was a murder, which Lena and Vi herself deny. There is a tense moment when Sally mentions it, but both Sally and Vi avoid spoiling the friendly atmosphere.

All four women suffer from some unknown but both internal and external trauma. Thus, their tea gathering provides a temporary protection from their mental pain. In a way, the backyard of Sally, who hosts the other women,

<sup>17</sup> Herman Melville: *Moby-Dick*, in Harrison Hayford – Hershel Parker (eds.): *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text Reviews and Letters by Melville Analogues and Sources Criticism*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1967, 470.

<sup>18</sup> Job 1:15, 1:16, 1:17, 1:19.

<sup>19</sup> Job 1:13–1:19.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Wiegand: Sunshine and terrible rage: Linda Bassett on Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, *The Guardian*, 10 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/10/linda-bassett-caryl-churchill-escaped-alone-royal-court> (accessed 11 July 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Churchill's 2012 play, *Love and Information*, composed of many short scenes, starts with a scene titled "The Secret," in which one character asks another her secret, which, as in Beckett's *Come and Go*, is disclosed in a whisper to her companion but never to the audience.

looks secluded from the outer grim world. It is surrounded by a high wall and this space, inhabited by women, becomes temporarily an Eden, removed from male-dominated society. When we think of most of the catastrophes and disasters caused by men, this high wall makes the women appear safe, as if it were the only way for them to keep away from any tragedy today. However, the space also resembles a prison with the surrounding high wall. It can be said that the women are trapped in the small space. And this wall is gone, or at least becomes obscure, whenever those women tell their traumatic stories — when they speak their inner monologues in a spotlight or on a darkened stage, as if they were thrown into a dark ocean.

Besides, the women who are invited to tea at Sally's are not always harmonious and joyful. First of all, Sally, Vi, and Lena are old friends, but the fourth woman, Mrs Jarrett, is just Sally's neighbor and cut off from the others. In the opening scene, she happens to peep through the open door when the other three are chatting. Sally, noticing her, invites her for tea. Mrs Jarrett, who cannot share the others' memories of the past, is an outsider. However, she tries to be a part of the group by asking questions and taking advantage of the chance to give her views, though she seems to be slighted. She stands apart from the other three in her appearance and in her speech. She wears "leggings and an old khaki jacket," so that "she's part prophet of future destruction, part refugee from some unnervingly distorted parallel present."<sup>22</sup> "From Mrs Jarrett's dialectical usages and shorthand terms," says Cathal Quinn, "one can tell that she speaks estuary English and perhaps she is a class down from the others, not formally educated or sophisticated."<sup>23</sup> Her name is abbreviated in the script as just "Mrs J," and she is never intimately called by her first name, unlike the others. Therefore, "[n]o one seriously engages with her. [...] She is excluded, and her intrusion resented. They [the other women] started by asking, 'Is it that woman?' establishing her otherness to them."<sup>24</sup> Thus, Mrs Jarrett is given the role of Cassandra, a prophetess<sup>25</sup> who foresaw the

<sup>22</sup> Claire Allfree: *Escaped Alone*, Royal Court, review: 'terrific cast with nowhere to go', *The Telegraph*, 29 January 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/escaped-alone-royal-court-review-terrific-cast-with-nowhere-to-go/>, (accessed 11 July 2016).

<sup>23</sup> From a lecture on *Escaped Alone* by Cathal Quinn at Aoyama Gakuin University on 7 June 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Lizzie Loveridge: A *CurtainUp* London Review *Escaped Alone*, *CurtainUp*, 21 January 2016, [www.curtainup.com/escapedalonelon16.html](http://www.curtainup.com/escapedalonelon16.html), (accessed 11 July 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Neil Dowden: Review: *Escaped Alone* brews storm in a teacup, *Londonist*, 3 February 2016, <https://londonist.com/2016/02/review-escaped-alone-brews-storm-in-a-teacup>, (accessed 11 July 2016), calls Mrs Jarrett "an amusingly eccentric, Cassandra-like doomsayer," while Paul Taylor writes in *Escaped Alone*, Royal Court Theatre, review: The performance is a rich birthday present, *The Independent*, 29 January 2016, <https://my.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/escaped-alone-royal-court-theatre-review-the-performance-is-a-rich-birthday-present-with-a6841546.html>, (accessed 11 July 2016), "Mrs J, in a manner that is more head-shaking, gossipy neighbour than Cassandra or Book of Job, delivers bizarre reports of global horror."



dystopian future: "a harrowing portrait of life after the nuclear holocaust for the survivors."<sup>26</sup> When she foretells the nightmarish future, she escapes from the tea and stands at the edge of the blackened stage surrounded by two pulsing, electrified frames (at the Royal Court Theatre). It presents the space inside her mind, which is filled with fear and anger about today's global destruction.

On the other hand, the conversation over tea sounds peaceful, and the women overall look comfortable being together and chatting. They even high-spiritedly sing a song (The Crystals' "Da Doo Ron Ron") together in one of the scenes. Their emotional mood, however, repeatedly shifts from high to low in the course of the play, depending on their topics that change from the trivial happenings in their families to a lament about the world today. Besides Mrs Jarrett's independent monologues, there are three long gloomy soliloquies in which each of the other three women discloses her own trauma only to the audience, when she is spotlighted in tableau with the others. What is revealed from the soliloquies is that Sally is obsessed by her fear of cats, so when she finds them around the house or even hears the word "cats," she is thrown into a panic; that Lena, who used to be a high-flying executive in an office, has mental health problems and cannot go out even to shop at the nearest Tesco; and that Vi, who was jailed for killing her husband and is now released, cannot go into the kitchen and cook meat because it reminds her of the moment she killed him. These inner soliloquies, in combination with Mrs Jarrett's incantation of "terrible rage" in the last scene, reveal these women's frustration and irritation against the male-dominated society of today, just as other plays by Churchill do. They are "inundated with their own individual problems as they struggle to keep their heads above water."<sup>27</sup> This comment resonates with Beckett, who told his actors when he directed *Waiting for Godot* at the Schiller Theater in 1975 to "imagine that Vladimir and Estragon were in a boat with a hole in it. They pump it dry but then panic as it begins immediately to fill up again and they have to resume pumping. He also described them as taking part in 'a game to stay alive.'<sup>28</sup> Thus, the characters of Churchill closely resemble Beckett's two tramps; they are all "survivors" who manage to "stay alive."

However, in Beckett's post-apocalyptic works such as *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, the survivors are still struggling to hold on to their ordinary lives until their fate of death arrives, and in that sense, their situations have a pseudo-reality, whereas the post-apocalyptic world Mrs Jarrett speaks to us about is far from reality: as Paul Taylor describes, Churchill "pushes the result to a

<sup>26</sup> Loveridge: London Review.

<sup>27</sup> Dowden: Review.

<sup>28</sup> Dougald McMillan – James Knowlson (eds.): *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot*, New York, Grove, 1993, 105–106.



point of grotesque absurdity.”<sup>29</sup> Mrs Jarrett’s monologues refer to catastrophes caused by four elements: water, air, fire and earth, but at the same time every natural disaster in this future world reflects leading-edge technology. The landslide in her first monologue, which was caused by land development carried out by “senior executives,” “buried villages,” where “new communities of survivors underground developed skills of feeding off the dead” and as “time passed,” “various sects developed with tolerance and bitter hatred” among the underground inhabitants till they “went insane.”<sup>30</sup> In her second monologue, she says water overflowed in the baths, swimming pools and rivers as well as “the walls of water came from the sea,” and those who survived by running to rooftops were saved by helicopter “when the flood receded,” and the shovels and buckets used to scoop up the muck “were stored in the flood museums.”<sup>31</sup> In the third monologue, just like a medieval plague, an epidemic spread from “[t]he chemicals leak[ing] through cracks in the money” and caused “domestic violence,” “school absenteeism,” “miscarriages,” or “birth deformities.”<sup>32</sup> “The remaining citizens were evacuated to camps in northern Canada.”<sup>33</sup> However, as the fourth monologue reveals, “[t]he hunger began when eighty per cent of food was diverted to tv programmes” so that “the dying could [just] watch cooking” on “iPlayer” or “smartphones.”<sup>34</sup> “The obese sold slices of themselves until hunger drove them to eat their own rashers.”<sup>35</sup> In the fifth monologue, “[t]he wind developed by property developers” blew so hard that everything — cars, citizens, and pets, as well as “shanty towns” — was blown into the sky and cleared away.<sup>36</sup> The sixth monologue focuses again on a plague, which this time “started when children drank sugar developed from monkeys” and so “[g]overnments cleansed infected areas and made deals with allies to bomb each other’s capitals.”<sup>37</sup> The last monologue is about fire spreading from one place to another. But in this case, “[f]inally the wind drove the fire to the ocean, where salt water made survivors faint” and “[t]he blackened area was declared a separate country with zero population, zero growth and zero politics.”<sup>38</sup> As one can guess from this summary, the dystopia Mrs Jarrett narrates is bizarre. However, we cannot laugh away what she says, because every recent terrible disaster which has caused mass death is implied in her speech, as the following passage from Žižek exemplifies:

<sup>29</sup> Taylor: Review.

<sup>30</sup> Caryl Churchill: *Escaped Alone*, London, Nick Hern Books, 2016, 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

The great ecological disasters of 2010, harbingers of much more 'interesting' things to come, seem to cover all four elements which, according to the ancient cosmology, make up our universe: air (volcanic ash clouds from Iceland immobilizing air travel over Europe), earth (mud slides in China), fire (rendering Moscow almost unlivable), water (polluted by oil in the Gulf of Mexico, floods displacing millions in Pakistan).<sup>39</sup>

Churchill describes in *Far Away* as if it were a fairy-tale the progressive ecological destruction of nature and unstoppable wars, which might induce the collapse of democracy and the birth of a regimented society controlled by a totalitarian leader. She exhibits this further through Mrs Jarrett's monologues in *Escaped Alone*, but it is more ominous than the way it is depicted in *Far Away*, because in *Escaped Alone* such catastrophes are juxtaposed with the everyday lives of the women. They invade the women's peaceful-looking lives. Mrs Jarrett's (or Churchill's) fear about the possible end of the world is not a science-fiction fantasy anymore. Her prophecy has the sense of *bukimi* (a Japanese word meaning something ominous or uncanny), which Paul K. Saint-Amour refers to as "pre-traumatic syndrome."<sup>40</sup>

#### PRE-TRAUMATIC SYNDROME AND ANIMALITY

Pre-traumatic syndrome permeated more than ever in the period between the end of World War II and the Cold War era, and has lasted up to the present day, though many of us are not aware of it unless it surfaces. When we hear the news of mass death/murder caused by war, terror, a natural disaster or an environmental crisis, we are faced with the vulnerability of being human.

Beckett was well aware of such catastrophes, which meant that he was always on the side of the vulnerable, but he never specifically referred to a catastrophe itself.<sup>41</sup> The origin of his characters' trauma is never clarified in his work, though it is clear that they are thrown into life in pain by some unknown cause. To Beckett, being born into this world is itself a catastrophe. As birth is something that cannot be reasoned, death is also a mystery to us, so that we fear our own death. Hence, if birth gives pain to him, death

<sup>39</sup> Žižek: *End Times*, 420.

<sup>40</sup> Paul K. Saint-Amour, in his *Tense Future*, redefines modernity in the inter-war period as traumatic from the "memory of a disastrous history [World War I] and the prospect of an even more devastating futurity [World War II]". Paul K. Saint-Amour: *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*, Oxford, Oxford University, 2015, 35. He especially focuses on the latter "pre-traumatic syndrome" (Ibid., 15) exemplified in the sense of the *bukimi* people in Hiroshima felt before the atomic bomb attack.

<sup>41</sup> It is, however, noteworthy that Beckett wrote a play entitled *Catastrophe*. As the play depicts a rehearsal scene in the theater, the meaning of the title invokes "the denouement of a drama" as well as "a disaster."

is the pre-traumatic syndrome for every human being as well as for Beckett. He makes us aware that our birth and death are catastrophes which we, the creatures, all have to go through, especially in the post-apocalyptic times when human life is belittled and vulnerable.

Churchill shares with Beckett the pre-traumatic syndrome that people today repress, and that is why she, like Beckett, imagines the post-apocalyptic condition of human beings as being similar to that of animals: "I might not be human a bird a bird [...] I might be a rabid street dog foaming a cow up the ramp to the slaughter [...] I might be an insect,"<sup>42</sup> imagines the dead person in *Here We Go*. Such imagination of one wishing to be other forms of life is repeatedly depicted in *Escaped Alone*. It creates an atmosphere of *bukimi*. For example, Vi and Lena refer to their dream of "flying like a bird in the sky"<sup>43</sup> or of flying "straight up like a lark... or hover like... a kestrel... or an eagle."<sup>44</sup> Sally hates the idea of birds because the idea "leads to cats, pigeons leads to cats,"<sup>45</sup> and the monologue of her horror about cats goes on and on. Just as all sorts of animals appear and make warfare against one another in *Far Away*, birds and cats turn into enemies to Sally, who fears being poisoned by those "filthy"<sup>46</sup> animals. The reversal of the powers between small creatures and human beings described in such dialogues by Churchill makes us aware of the fact that human existence is parallel to that of animals, birds and even insects. It reminds us of Beckett's interests in referring to rats, worms, bees, or ants.<sup>47</sup> Both writers find in the birth, survival, and death of small creatures the similar fate of us human beings, from which is shown the vulnerability of a life. Especially after the 1990, Churchill inclines more strongly to describing the parallel between human beings and animals, "demonstrat[ing] that to discount the non-human world is to risk a damaged ecology of all forms of life."<sup>48</sup>

The vulnerable in Churchill cannot speak properly, and their words become fragmented just as the language of Beckett's characters does. The inner monologues by the three women and the lengthy monologues by Mrs Jarrett in particular are confused and disorganized because the women's fear keeps them from reasoning. One might imagine Mrs Jarrett's speech as almost the equivalent of Lucky's "think" in *Waiting for Godot*. The trauma of the elderly women and their fear of an unknown future are conveyed to us through incoherent, fragmented language. And even within their fragmented conversations, which

<sup>42</sup> Churchill: *Here We Go*, London, Nick Hern Books, 2015, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Churchill: *Escaped Alone*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> See Mary Bryden (ed.): *Beckett and Animals*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Elaine Aston: Caryl Churchill's "Dark Ecology," in Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh (eds.): *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, the Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015, 62.

look like normal exchanges, something ominous is hidden. They lament that the shops in the street are now gone or that British money has changed into the decimal system. The good old days are gone, and now what is left to them? Each of the four women has been traumatized not just by her personal experience in the past, but also by her fear for the future of society and even of the earth. They are, in that sense, all suffering from pre-traumatic syndrome related to the annihilation of humanity and the death of the earth that might occur in the future.

In fact, Mrs Jarrett's last description of the earth which turned into a "blackened area" with "zero population, zero growth and zero politics"<sup>49</sup> reminds us of the "ground zero" which connotes both Hiroshima, a nuclear holocaust, and 9/11 in New York City. In *Far Away*, Churchill ends the play with the most fearful thing being "the weather" that is "on the side of the Japanese."<sup>50</sup> How ironic does this line sound? Hiroshima had beautiful weather on the day when the A-bomb was dropped, and the weather was on the side of the American Army. Looking at the blue sky, people in Hiroshima felt *bukimi*. In both plays, Churchill makes the audience associate pre-traumatic syndrome with the post-traumatic experience known as a nuclear catastrophe. And her "egalitarian and ethical rhythms of human-to-human and human-to-non-human existence"<sup>51</sup> is the legacy of Beckett, whose post-war works reveal the most vulnerable human beings who manage to survive in the end of the world, whether it is a nuclear holocaust or the earth which has been reduced to environmental devastation.

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<sup>49</sup> Churchill: *Escaped Alone*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> Churchill: *Far Away*, New York, Theatre Communication Group, 2000, 43.

<sup>51</sup> Aston: "Dark Ecology," 75.

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## SHOES THAT ARE LEFT BEHIND: GÁBOR TOMPA'S BECKETT HERITAGE



ANITA RÁKÓCZY

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores Gábor Tompa's directorial approach to Samuel Beckett through theatre productions, reviews, and interviews with him and his permanent dramaturg András Visky. Gábor Tompa, internationally acclaimed Romanian-Hungarian artist, general and artistic director of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, has staged more Hungarian-language Beckett productions than any other director. As a student he staged Samuel Beckett's Happy Days in 1979, and that, his first acknowledged production as a theatre director, marks the beginning of his entire artistic career. Since then, he has directed Waiting for Godot three times with a Hungarian-speaking cast, and another four times as a guest director. His credits also include two Hungarian-language Endgame productions and a staging of Play. My research offers a thorough analysis of a selection of Tompa's Beckett directions: Happy Days (1979), Waiting for Godot (2005), Play (2003), and Endgame (2016). Tompa's restless returns to his master reflect his firm belief that the Hungarian theatre tradition lacks, and is therefore in great need of, Beckett productions.*

G.B.: Many say that the age of absurd dramas is over, but you keep returning to them like a monomaniac. Why?

G:T: I wonder where those people live who claim that the age of the absurd is past, in what time, and whether they are alive at all. Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* falls into the category of absurd just as well as Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, *Cherry Orchard*, and the works of Ionesco, Beckett, Mrożek, Gombrowicz. The authors of those apocalyptic times that we live in.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bóta, Gábor: A magyarországi színhátság elveszett lelke [The Lost Soul of Hungarian Dramatic Art], *Magyar Hírlap*, 1 February 2003, 24. English translation by Anita Rákóczy (as are all translations in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated).



Gábor Tompa, internationally acclaimed Romanian-Hungarian artist, earned his degree in stage and film directing at the I. L. Caragiale Theatre and Film Academy, Bucharest, in 1981. However, he was only a second-year student when he staged Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* in 1979, and this, his first acknowledged production as a theatre director, marks the beginning of his artistic career. Since then Tompa, general and artistic director of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, Romania, has staged more Hungarian-language Beckett productions than any other director. According to the Productions Database of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, he has directed *Waiting for Godot* three times with a Hungarian-speaking cast (Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok, 1992; Víg Theatre, Budapest, 2003; Tamási Áron Theatre, Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2005), and another four times as a guest director (Staatstheater, Freiburg, Kammerspiele, 1995; Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 1999; Manitoba Theatre Centre, Winnipeg, 2001; Theodore and Adele Shank Theatre, San Diego, 2017). His credits also include two Hungarian-language *Endgame* productions (Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, 1999; National Theatre Târgu-Mureş, 2016) and a staging of *Play* (Thália Studio, Budapest, 2003). In the 1980s, Tompa befriended and later began to work with the dramaturg, essayist, and playwright András Visky,<sup>2</sup> who shared his devotion to Beckett, and has been the dramaturg of most of Tompa's Beckett directions ever since. Beckett's indisputable influence is detectable in the great number of Beckett's plays and their perpetual recurrence in Tompa's directorial oeuvre, suggesting that his first encounter with Beckett before graduation was not accidental but one of those instinctive, ontological choices that shape one's entire life. This chapter, through interviews, reviews, and a selection of his Beckett productions, sets out to explore Gábor Tompa's artistic approach to staging Beckett.

#### *HAPPY DAYS: WHEN THE SYSTEM CRASHES*

As András Nagy argues, Tompa's dynamically expanding directorial oeuvre never ceases to have exciting experiments and surprises in store, as "in his fate and growing up that could become (an artistic) blessing which otherwise was a (historic) curse [...] In his most formative years, intellectual breathlessness and the vacuum space of theatrical talent proved to be inseparable in both Bucharest and Cluj."<sup>3</sup> Unlike the director-centered tradition that the

<sup>2</sup> András Visky (1957) is a playwright, essayist, and dramaturg, born in Târgu-Mureş, Romania. Visky is the artistic director of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, and developer of the term "barrack-dramaturgy." His plays have been staged in several countries including Romania, Hungary, France, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, England, Scotland, and the United States. He is one of the co-founders and the former executive director of Koinónia Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Nagy, András: Beckett – Múlt időben [Beckett – In Past Tense], *Színház* (July 2003), 8.

Hungarian theatre culture would dictate, Tompa treats Beckett's plays with respect on the textual level, considering them as musical scores in terms of pace, rhythm, and structure. However, he has grown to appreciate and keep Beckett's stage instructions only with time, as in his 1979 *Happy Days*, despite Beckett's original intentions, he cast in the role of Winnie the young actress Aurora Leonte, only twenty-six years of age but with exceptionally strong theatrical presence. As Tompa recalls in his interview series with the Romanian theatre critic Florica Ichim:

To me, Winnie's rebellion, as she by no means resigned herself to her situation, was at the same time the rebellion of my generation as well, because of our freedom that was buried, trampled into the ground. Although the production was interesting, it drifted away considerably from the Beckettian intention. But we were young and of course we were looking for plays [...] that dealt with the relationship between the individual and the authorities. In the 90s, many of my directions tackled this problem, though not openly, not on the level of cheap political actualization. My Beckett production at the Academy was one of the first manifestations of this endeavor. I realized that I had nowhere near exhausted the richness, the multiple layers of the Beckettian text, I had not revealed its profound depths. I was twenty-one, twenty-two years old.<sup>4</sup>

Tompa's *Happy Days* was a one-hour show that later toured in the Teatrul Foarte Mic<sup>5</sup> and in Târgu Mureş. The set followed Tompa's vision. Throughout the production, Aurora sat on a chair at a table surrounded by various objects: mattresses, planks, rags, pieces of junk — “the discarded props of civilization.”<sup>6</sup> There was a small car on stage, a miniature Rolls Royce that Tompa had borrowed from a friend of his mother for the premiere.<sup>7</sup> It was a special toy car made of Bakelite with a little engine, gilded metallic wheels and a spare tire at the back which one could turn and thus, from a built-in music box, a song from the 1920s — similar to *Tea for Two* — started to sound. The car was also a brandy-glass holder, with the delicate glasses carefully lined up on the back seat. As Tompa recalls, this stage prop was involved in the most beautiful moment of *Happy Days*, which he remembers fondly to this day.<sup>8</sup> It is a scene in which Winnie “confuses objects and she wants to clean her teeth with the revolver, do her hair with the toothbrush

<sup>4</sup> Florica Ichim: *Tompa Gábor: Beszélgetések hat felvonásban* [Gábor Tompa. Conversations in Six Acts], Csíkszereda, Pallas-Akadémia Könyvkiadó, 2004, 189. Translated into English from Éva Váli's Hungarian translation.

<sup>5</sup> Foarte Mic [Very Small Theatre], a repertory theatre in Bucharest.

<sup>6</sup> Ichim: *Tompa Gábor*, 189.

<sup>7</sup> Public performance at the Academy at the end of term, a type of examination.

<sup>8</sup> Ichim: *Tompa Gábor*, 189.



and shoot herself with the comb. Meanwhile, the car begins its slow descent down the slope of the mound [...], it bumps into something somewhere and it stops, but the music continues to play.”<sup>9</sup>

Tompa touches the core of *Happy Days* with the fresh, unusual directorial approach of depicting Winnie in a state of agnosia, having her mix up the objects that are so familiar to her, that help her through the days from one bell-ring to the next. She lives in automatism, conducting pre-composed choreographies of rummaging things out of her bag and putting them back again when the time comes. In this scene, with clarity and simplicity, Tompa raises the question of what would happen if suddenly (or gradually) these preserving automatism collapsed. What remains when, because of a small mistake or two — for example, picking up the Browning instead of the toothpaste — Winnie can no longer trust her own cognitive abilities, her last “road marks,” and the whole system crashes? The music unstopably coming from the broken-down Rolls Royce, with its ceaseless merriment, is a sharp counterpoint to Winnie’s decay. It could sound in the living room of a content middle-class housewife, heralding that “all is good” when nothing is, although Winnie tries her best to take no notice of it. It is poignant to see how hard she fights to remain on the surface; she even refrains from opening her bag too often for the objects that give her a sense of security. Tompa deprives her of the very means of holding herself together.

*Happy Days*, Tompa’s first encounter with Beckett, was a lively, courageous production, governed by strong images and a bold attitude of admittedly “fully discarding”<sup>10</sup> the author’s stage instructions. Tompa explains that it took him some years to realize, during an AEA master course in the US (Wilma Theatre, Philadelphia, 1992) where he directed Rebecca Olsen in the role of Winnie — she was one of Joseph Chaikin’s actresses,<sup>11</sup> an older woman this time, from whose lips Beckett’s lines sounded differently — that *Happy Days* is not a play about rebellion, but its exact opposite: cheerfulness and artless optimism.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 190. Tompa later used this motif in his Philadelphia and Barcelona directions of *Happy Days*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Chaikin, actor, director, and founder of Open Theatre. Chaikin collaborated with Samuel Beckett and Sam Shepard, and staged their works in the Joseph Papp Public Theatre, Yale Repertory, the Manhattan Theatre Club, the Mark Taper Forum, and several other theatres. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/24/nyregion/joseph-chaikin-67-actor-and-innovative-director.html> (accessed 29 April 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Ichim: *Tompa Gábor*, 189.

## WAITING FOR GODOT: WHITE SHOES, WHITE STATIC

Tompa's sixth *Waiting for Godot* opened at Tamási Áron Theatre, Sepsiszentgyörgy, Romania on 9 October 2005, to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Beckett's birthday and to mark the year when György Harag (Transylvanian Hungarian director, actor, theatre company founder and mentor to many theatre artists, including Gábor Tompa), would have become eighty years old. Later, in 2006, the production toured to various venues, for example the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj and at the abandoned missile base of the Hungarian air force, the Theatre Base of Zsámbék, as part of the Zsámbék Theatre Festival.

Tompa's idea of the set was first realized by the set and costume designer András Both in Belfast: a vast empty space filled with shoes and boots, all painted white.<sup>13</sup> In the Sepsiszentgyörgy production this basic concept is preserved, with a great emphasis on Estragon's individual pair of boots, as well as on the countless slippers and footwear covering the entire stage. They are distributed unevenly, a line of shoes here and there, thinner and denser sequences, as if their owners had had to leave them behind in haste, with not a soul remaining to re-arrange the shoes in order. All of them show visible signs of wear so that we can imagine the feet that had trodden in them, and what had been above — ankles, knees, skirts, trousers, and faces. The spectacle is reminiscent of the Holocaust memorial *Shoes on the Danube Bank*, a sculpture in Budapest created by Gyula Pauer that consists of sixty pairs of cast-iron shoes along the east bank of the river, near the Parliament, to honor the people (mainly Budapest Jews) who were murdered by fascist Arrow Cross militiamen during World War II. The victims were ordered to take off their shoes, and were shot into the water, leaving only their shoes behind on the bank. On Tompa's stage, a few inches left from the center, there is a large heap made entirely of abandoned shoes, reminiscent of death camps and the mountains of carefully selected objects stolen from the victims. An old, discarded TV set is placed on top, with electric wires hanging out of it. Also, there is a whiteness over the stage, which, rather than paint, appears to be a thick layer of dust or cement-powder that becomes even whiter in the second act, covering a desolate place, a no man's land. From the very beginning, the first question that comes to mind at the sight of the set is *what has happened* here — the mystery that also Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky are so eager to find out.

In Tompa's direction, the collective traumas of humanity are at the same time individual traumas. The show opens with a single spotlight focusing on Estragon's boots — he is struggling with them badly — and then the

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 185.

entire field of shoes becomes visible. Estragon's fight gave Tompa the idea for the set,<sup>14</sup> and Vladimir's remark in Act II, "To every man his little cross."<sup>15</sup> Estragon (Tibor Pálffy) fails to come to terms with his shoes, and for most of Act I he is wearing only half the pair. When the sun sets and before the stage darkens, the spotlight lands back on his shoes, which he takes off and leaves downstage center, inherently a potent location. At the same time the moon rises — the same size as the circular pool of light around Estragon's boots — a pattern of visual symmetry and repetition that characterizes many of Tompa's Beckett directions. Act II also begins and ends with the spotlight on Estragon's shoes as he had left them the night before or for the night to come. He is reluctant to accept his footwear as his own, and puts them on only when Vladimir (Loránd Váta) convinces him that they are not his, but belong rather to someone else with smaller feet. Following this logic, the stage is full of shoes that their owners wished not to own, or could not own any longer, remnants of abandoned fates or broken walks of life. However, Tompa goes one step further on the road of individual and collective traumas: each time he directs *Waiting for Godot* the audience is asked to provide the shoes for the set. As he sums up, "We love this. It means that the theatre acquires the used footwear by posting a classified ad, and before the premiere, members of the audience themselves give us their discarded shoes, thus playing their part in the production and the fates of Vladimir and Estragon."<sup>16</sup>

Another significant innovation of Tompa's 2005 *Godot* is that the role of Lucky is given to the actress Hilda Péter. This, as Tompa argues, aims to emphasize not the femininity of the character but its genderlessness.<sup>17</sup> István Zsehránszky notes in his review that Péter's rendering of Lucky perfectly justifies Tompa's choice of a woman for the role: "Several millions of women keep playing this unexplainable but still understandable servile fidelity. The inability to revolt. The horror."<sup>18</sup> Péter, who in 2005 was awarded the UNITER Prize for the best supporting role,<sup>19</sup> mobilizes a great variety of energies in her role of Lucky, ranging from vulnerability — such frailness that it almost results in physical transparency — to neurotic spasms, followed by unearthly

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Beckett: *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber and Faber, 1990, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Zsigmond, Andrea: Zárt formák rendje. Beszélgetés Tompa Gábor színházi rendezővel, a Kolozsvári Állami Magyar Színház igazgatójával [The Order of Closed Forms. Interview with Stage Director Gábor Tompa, Director of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj], *Székelőföld*, X/1., January 2006, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>18</sup> Zsehránszky, István: Bohóc az egész világ [The Whole World is Clownery], *Erdélyi Riport*, 2 February 2006, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Metz, Katalin: Birkózás léttel és idővel [Wrestling with Being and Time], *Magyar Nemzet*, 8 May 2006. UNITER Prize is awarded every year by *Uniunea Teatrală din România*, the Theater Union of Romania (established in 1990, after the 1989 Romanian Revolution) for outstanding contributions to theatre art.

strength and visionary revelation. When one first catches sight of her in torn jeans at the end of Pozzo's (Levente Nemes) rope, it is noticeable that she has developed a special motion score for the character: moving with great speed, her neck keeps twitching, nodding repeatedly. She creates the impression that she is a highly organized marionette whose loose body parts have lives of their own, so while trying to be in full control, she has lost control over her own self, just like Winnie. The scene in which, for a considerable length of time, Lucky holds the bags raised up from the ground instead of resting (Vladimir and Estragon wonder why she does not put them down) might also be interpreted as losing control and with great effort regaining it again. As Lucky begins to sag slowly, in the "rhythm of one sleeping on his feet,"<sup>20</sup> she lets go of the bags, so they drop down on the floor; but an instant later she awakes, grabs the handles of the bags and lifts them up in haste, in correction of her careless behavior. Tompa renders Lucky's gentle going to sleep with such subtlety and precise pace that her brief mime with the bags becomes the focal point of attention.

Lucky is located in the center of the stage for much of the production, the most memorable example of which is her monologue. As opposed to the rapid, almost rhythmic, game-like tempo of Vladimir and Estragon's dialogue, Lucky begins her speech first in silence with only her lips moving, trying to form syllables, words that are just being born or learnt again. When she starts to speak, her delivery is slow and steady, by no means the unfathomable, speedy flow of words that other Luckys often tend to produce. Rather, it sounds like a prophecy, scanned, gradually accelerating, with her standing straight, right in the middle of the stage, and looking up towards the sky all the while. Whether her gaze signifies the lost connection and makes her a messenger in trance or whether the look in her eyes shows nothing but accusation is for the audience to decide.

Tompa's fascination with electronic gadgets found its way into this production through the staging of the boy. In both acts, when the time comes, the discarded and unplugged TV-set on top of the shoes suddenly turns itself on, and the boy appears on the screen as if in a live broadcast. Tompa recalls that "my idea was that the child follows Vladimir and Estragon's walks in front of the television and answers them in such a way as if he has seen their every movement. And at the moment when Vladimir asks, 'You did see us, didn't you?,'<sup>21</sup> the image of the boy disappears and only the white, static screen remains instead of him."<sup>22</sup> His angelic face, like Lucky's gaze, initiates at least two ways of interpretation that seemingly differ but still unite in this theatrical metaphor: Godot's herald, arriving through a TV screen, is meant to

<sup>20</sup> Beckett: *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> Ichim: *Tompa Gábor*, 185.

represent “a certain kind of unverifiability and manipulation,”<sup>23</sup> the unnerving experience of being watched. However, at the same time, the appearance of the boy still brings an element of hope, proof that the connection that Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for has been established, through a TV screen — which might seem peculiar at first, but given that the play takes place in an entirely echoless space where God has abandoned mankind, traditional ways of reaching out do not function anymore. As the dramaturg of the production András Visky argues, the “sacred” announces itself exclusively through blasphemy and is altogether unrecognizable. He points out, “God has gotten beyond the boundaries of addressability; human language does not remember the means of approaching the Divine anymore.”<sup>24</sup> While the TV set creates a distance, alienation in the Brechtian sense, it brings the boy and thus Godot closer to us at the same time. In Tompa’s opinion,

All of Beckett’s dramas are survival games. This is what we all play. For if every single moment we were aware of the fact that we will die, life would become unbearable. Beckett is fighting with God. He is blaming God for not intervening immediately. If you exist, interfere, act now! Not at the Last Judgement. [...] For Beckett, God is in the dock because there is no present time redemption.<sup>25</sup>

Act II closes with three sources of light in the darkening stage before the blackout: Estragon’s shoes downstage center, the moon in the darkening sky, and the random dot pixel pattern of static displayed on the TV screen.

#### PLAY: ALL ABOUT LOVE

Tompa’s direction of *Play* (*Játék*), Thália Theatre, New Thália Studio, Budapest, 2003) opens with another “cold medium”<sup>26</sup>: a moment after revealing the three empty urns that almost fill the entire stage, a montage of love scenes from emblematic movies and silent films from the twentieth century begins to be projected on the backdrop screen of the stage. For the first eight minutes, fragments about longing, fulfilment, temptation, seduction, desire, and loss are shown in rapid alternation, with overwhelming force, to the background

<sup>23</sup> Kerékgyártó, György: Egy színházi előadás nem ad válaszokat [A Theatre Production Does Not Give Answers], *Népszava*, 3 February 2003, 12.

<sup>24</sup> András Visky: *Art Vital. The Theatre of Prophet Ezekiel*, Conference paper delivered on 8 May 2015, Religion and Art Conference, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary.

<sup>25</sup> Ichim: *Tompa Gábor*, 109.

<sup>26</sup> Nagy, András: Beckett – Múlt időben, 10.

music of Attila Demény, and Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*. A hand appears from time to time, playing the piano, turning suddenly into a skeleton palm and fingers to gently suggest that nothing lasts forever.

The urns of M, W1, and W2 are touching each other. However, unlike Beckett's stage instructions, they are neither grey nor exactly identical. Although these pieces of András Both's "neo-futurist," X-ray machine-like set are of the same size and roughly the same material,<sup>27</sup> they are individualized as their inhabitants have their unique stories to tell. With their small built-in drawers, they are reminiscent of sideboards, but confessionals, guillotines, old stoves, and private crematories also come to mind when exploring these wooden structures: the closed doors with handles in the middle and the carved, arched chin rests to which the heads of the characters seem to be fixed. The urns stand on a podium surrounded by innumerable forks and spoons lying on the floor, evoking the broken intimacy of breakfasts and dinners — kitchens of places M, W1, and W2 once called home — unwillingly shared cutlery.

All three are pale, chalk-white in fact, their hair slightly red, other-worldly, as the light, the fourth character, begins to make them speak. Light is torture. Speaking is torture. But darkness is worse. They speak neither slower nor faster than they would in their living rooms, but their bleak stares, radiant from suffering, are fixed to a point straight in front of them in the dark, their eyes not moving an inch. Later, when they mention the "change" after the blackout,<sup>28</sup> their gazes change direction — from that moment, just like Tompa's Lucky during her monologue, M, W1 and W2 keep looking up towards the sky until the end of the play, indicating that they are sinking deeper and deeper in their situation and that the light, which they desperately long for, reaches them from an increasingly higher and more distant source. Their confessions, however, are not forced by an external authority: they burst out (in colorless monotone) due to an "insatiable internal urge from which there is no escape, apparently not even after death. On the contrary, the story becomes truly fatal afterwards, as all possibilities for change and action cease as soon as death sets in."<sup>29</sup>

Before the thirty-seven-minute production — Tompa's shortest-ever staging — is over,<sup>30</sup> the hands of W1 appear from behind her urn, her irresolute, searching fingers, and she opens the small cabinet right in front of her. The door reveals a cold, aluminium-foil interior with a cage and a parrot in it, brightly lit. Then it is M's turn to unveil the secret space at the center of his urn, preceded

<sup>27</sup> Metz, Katalin: *Holtszerelmesek holtidézéssel* [Dead Lovers Evoking the Dead], *Magyar Nemzet*, 24 November 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Beckett: *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 312.

<sup>29</sup> Zsófia Bíró: *Play Beckett*, *Criticai Lapok*, April 2004. <https://www.criticailapok.hu/25-2003/33940-play%20beckett>, (accessed 14 May 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Ichim: *Tompa Gábor*, 198.



by the same play with hands and fingers: a strongly lit X-ray of his spine and ribs become visible, some ribs broken, and a red rose lying in front of it, as if on a gravestone. Thirdly, W2 opens her door so that we can see her oversized anatomical heart inside, the artery and vein fondled by her delicate fingers. Finally, a choreographed dance of the six hands begins as they roam around, in a frenzy of post-mortem exploration, the compartments of their own urns and the urn(s) that they can reach: the one(s) next to them, that of the beloved(s). Zsófia Bíró recalls about the premiere that

The director, Gábor Tompa has given us a game to play, which the Budapest audiences, unaware of other possibilities, attempt to play according to their own rules. However, this does not work, as what we see or what we would like to see is not a film history quiz show, not a crime story, a necrophiliac fooling around or a bloody drama of love. Well, what is it then? Gábor Tompa's theatre is a language for us to learn if we wish to become involved; the original, sovereign language of the absurd.<sup>31</sup>

#### ENDGAME: FATHERS AND SONS<sup>32</sup>

The latest Hungarian-language production of *Endgame* opened in Tompa's direction at the National Theatre, Târgu-Mureş, Romania, on 13 May 2016. Although Tompa grew up in Târgu-Mureş, he had not worked there since 1989. When offered the chance to direct a play as a guest-director, he chose *Endgame*; the opportunity he took was the seventieth anniversary of the National Theatre of Târgu-Mureş, and over these seventy years this is the very first time that it has staged a Beckett drama. As Tompa argues, "this ice has to break at all costs."<sup>33</sup> He intended to direct a play that in a way depicted the problems of the region he once called home: a play about the father-son relationship in the widest possible context.<sup>34</sup>

The set is a closed system of a metallic box that may be an A-bomb shelter or a twenty-first-century torture-chamber where it is fairly easy to wash the blood off the walls. It leaves no marks. There is a small, square-shaped drain-hole on the floor, near the left window, which sometimes serves as a ladder-balancer for Clov. At other times, it probably drains off the water that covers the walls, since, as in Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, the walls of Hamm and Clov's interior

<sup>31</sup> Bíró: *Play Beckett*.

<sup>32</sup> An extended version of this section is published in the *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2018), 150–153. It is reprinted here by the kind permission of JOBS.

<sup>33</sup> Franciska Keresztes: *Interview with the Director Gábor Tompa*, the Theatre Program of *A játszma vége*, National Theatre, Târgu-Mureş, 13 May 2016, 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

are weeping. This space has no access to the outside world: although Clov opens the two small, round windows occasionally, they let in no draught, sound, or light of any kind. Metal, which seems to be the only surviving material, fills the entire evening starting from the convex, sharp-edged, silver letters of *A játszma vége* [Endgame] on the front page of the theatre program to the aluminium ladder, Hamm's three-legged dog made of a massive, long metal spring, and the large metallic ventilation pipes that run along the walls so that some air can enter the inhabitants' maximum security prison. Also, in the opening tableau, Hamm and his parents are covered with aluminium foil before the unveiling. However, the bins themselves are transparent with circular, metallic tops, and some elastic fabric in the middle in which Nagg and Nell spend their days like two chrysalids in an intermediate state.

The tension between the characters, the war between Hamm and Clov, which Beckett called the "nucleus of the play" during the 1967 Schiller Theater rehearsals,<sup>35</sup> works palpably throughout. József Bíró's Hamm, the actor and the writer, sitting in a red armchair on casters, is just one step away from finishing his story at the start of the action, but of course this last step may last for decades. However, it is László Zsolt Bartha's Clov who grows up in front of our eyes, as he, through Hamm's cruelty and his own increasing anger, gradually understands his own situation. Tompa and Visky resourcefully amplify the tension in Clov; the ladder that he carries around, and at times almost throws at Hamm, is a constant signifier of his temper. There are certain hate-mimes that he keeps doing behind the master's back, and one can see how his irritation rises as he receives from Hamm one laborious task after another. At one point, when Hamm talks about his dog on the ground looking at him, begging him for a walk, Clov kneels down to Hamm's stroking hand, pretending to be an obedient dog, understanding that he is being treated like a dog. From that moment, there is no turning back.

The rhythm of the production is sharp, precise, following Beckett's instructions — it drives Hamm to the verge of finishing his Opus Magnum, and drives Clov into becoming the second generation that questions the first (or the third that questions the second, rather), and reproaches him for his past sins and mistakes. It is through this process that Clov finally steps in exactly at the point where Hamm interrupts his story. In Tompa's interpretation, when Clov finally goes up the ladder and perhaps catches sight of a boy, it is a provocation towards Hamm, an open admission of being aware of his own past, of where he had come from and how he, Clov, had entered Hamm's service, which might bear a strong connection to the man who asked for some bread for his son on a Christmas Eve. At the moment Clov tells Hamm about the boy, Hamm's tone

<sup>35</sup> Gontarski, S. E. (ed.): *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Volume II, Endgame*, London, Faber and Faber, 1992, 50.



changes; he sends Clov away. With Clov's help, his catalysing, confrontational role, Hamm finally manages to complete his story. Or in fact, Clov completes it for him. There is a picture on the wall with its back to the audience, which at this point Clov turns around to expose the image in the painting: it is (almost) the opening tableau of the play, with Hamm in the middle, and Clov himself standing halfway between Hamm's armchair and the kitchen, his usual position. A finished product. A sign that has accepted its meaning.

Meanwhile, something unusual happens. It is Tompa's directorial addition, a coda that might be surprising for an audience that is used to directors following the author's stage directions verbatim. However, it strongly underlines Tompa's general concept of the play and a peculiar message that is unprecedented in the Hungarian-language *Endgame* productions. Towards the end, Annamária Biluska's Nell and Lajos Makra's Nagg (after both of them have died in the course of actions) emerge from the transparent bins. At this point, the elastic, metallic fabric disappears, and water starts running on the inside of the bins, like the tears on the walls.

Nagg and Nell, hand in hand, walk upstage, taking Hamm with them. The three, a nuclear family, stand in a row, holding onto each other, at the back of the stage, while a strange light spreads through the stage and especially on the three at the back. At first, the light appears to be an electrical discharge coming from the kitchen, but then it becomes clear that Tompa has flooded the stage in a transcendental light. In the meantime Clov, fully dressed, ready for departure, stands by the kitchen door, looking in the direction of the audience. He is the only one alive, the only unfinished sign. The play, in terms of Clov, is left open. Whether he stays or leaves, he has his whole paternal heritage to deal with in his travel bag.

Having explored a selection of Gábor Tompa's Beckett directions, a section of his Beckettian oeuvre, one may find that although he treats the author's spoken text with respect, does not alter or rewrite any part of the dialogue (with the exception of occasional retranslation, undoubtedly for the benefit of both Beckett's plays and the productions), he has innovative approaches and surprising turns in store when it comes to directions, set design and additional stage actions that are not present in Beckett's dramas. Also, Tompa has a devotion to electronic devices — either malfunctioning ones that suddenly start to function, or short circuits, electrical discharges, and breakdowns that are always connected to and open up the way for the presence of a different quality. Moreover, there is another feature common in each of the productions discussed — and in fact all of Tompa's Beckett directions — namely clownery. In Tompa's opinion, "all of Beckett's characters are clowns, including the immobile ones."<sup>36</sup> Even in *Play*,

<sup>36</sup> Ichim: *Tompa Gábor*, 113.

it is so interesting that even in the state of complete motionlessness, in which one can see only the most inexpressive faces possible, the concept of clownery is still present. The clowns hidden in the characters are there. Unmoving, stiff clowns. [...] The clown was there beside God at the time of Creation. Perhaps that is why God never sat on the throne that He had created but placed the celebration of Shabbat, the day of introspection, there instead. Those who are not aware of this always claim the throne, but there's nobody there. This is where the eternal, petty human fight for power originates from.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 197, 113.



# BODY, THE GAZE, AND ABSTRACTION: FROM SAMUEL BECKETT TO BRUCE NAUMAN

—◀—  
LLEWELLYN BROWN

## ABSTRACT

*Artist Bruce Nauman's video "Beckett Walk" is directly inspired by Samuel Beckett's works such as Watt and Molloy, showing shared preoccupations. Watt's walk follows abstract coordinates, testifying to the absence of a unified bodily image. In Nauman's walk, the body as subjectivity persists through geometrical forms. The use of the video undercuts the impression of surveillance, since the spectator is immobile, by contrast with the performer, whose movements escape his limited gaze. The walk as performance subordinates the specular image to the force that drives the pacing, and reveals the creation to be addressed to the spectator as other.*

Described as one of the greatest contemporary American artists,<sup>1</sup> Bruce Nauman (b. 1941) read Beckett in the sixties,<sup>2</sup> and took inspiration from him, raising the question as to what may be involved in this creative encounter. One creation is particularly worthy of attention in this respect: "Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)" (1968),<sup>3</sup> a one-hour monochrome video that explicitly pays tribute to Beckett's writings. This work belongs to his "Studio Films, a series of filmed performance pieces Nauman made in 1967–68, and which have since attained the status of signature works."<sup>4</sup>

A comparison will enable us to see the way the two artists are indeed concerned by common preoccupations, particularly in their relation to abstraction and the body. Steven Connor underscores that both "Beckett and Nauman have found a compulsion in the act of walking."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Beckett

<sup>1</sup> Gérard Wajcman: *Mother Fuckers, Élucidation* 3 (2002), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Coosje van Bruggen: *Bruce Nauman*, New York, Rizzoli, First Edition edition, 1988, 18.

<sup>3</sup> <https://vimeopro.com/user3539702/ubuweb/video/121813096>, (accessed 22 October 2017). Title henceforth abbreviated as Beckett Walk.

<sup>4</sup> Janet Kraynak: Bruce Nauman's Words, in Janet Kraynak (ed.): *Please pay attention please: Bruce Nauman's Words*, Cambridge [Mass.], MIT, 2003, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Connor: Shifting Ground, <http://stevenconnor.com/beckettnauman.html>, (accessed 22 October 2017). English version of an essay published in German as *Auf schwankendem Boden*, in the catalogue of the exhibition *Samuel Beckett, Bruce Nauman* (Vienna, Kunsthalle Wien, 2000), 80–87.

asserted that May's pacing in *Footfalls* was, paradoxically, the most important element of this play,<sup>6</sup> in spite of the spoken text's remarkable beauty. Nauman, for his part, explained the origin of some of his videos in *Gestalt* theory, which drew his attention to the importance of the apparently meaningless and insignificant action of moving around a closed space.<sup>7</sup>

#### BECKETT'S "WATT WALK"

Beckett often has his characters (in the *Three Novels*) or players (*Quad*) execute geometrically ordered movements through space. Such arbitrary constraints seem to impose a brutal discipline on the body's functioning. Among Beckett's uses of the walking motif, his description of Watt seems to be one likely source for Nauman's version:<sup>8</sup>

Watt's way of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south, and at the same time to fling out his left leg as far as possible towards the north, and then again to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, [...] and so on, over and over again, many many times, until he reached his destination, and could sit down. So, standing first on one leg, and then on the other, he moved forward, a headlong tardigrade, in a straight line.<sup>9</sup>

Watt's manner of walking manifests a form of comical disarticulation, rather than allowing for coordinated action where individual components combine within a harmonious movement. It contrasts with the apparently spontaneous gesture, where the body remains subservient to the aim of going from one point to another, leaving the walker free to contemplate the space traversed.

Here, Watt's walk displays a mixture of abstract and concrete elements, which succeed in breaking up his movements. His walk is rigidly set within the abstract coordinates of the four cardinal directions: *west* however remains

<sup>6</sup> 19 February 1976 (in Billie Whitelaw: *Billie Whitelaw... Who He?*, New York, St. Martin's, 1996, 139).

<sup>7</sup> Nauman in Kraynak: *Please pay attention please*, 166.

<sup>8</sup> Géraldine Sfez also notes this passage from *Molloy*: "There is rapture, or there should be, in the motion crutches give. It is a series of little flights, skimming the ground. You take off, you land, through the thronging sound in wind and limb, who have to fasten one foot to the ground before they dare lift up the other." Samuel Beckett: *Molloy* in *Three Novels*, New York, Grove, 1965, 59; Géraldine Sfez – Bruce Nauman – Samuel Beckett: *Le corps mis à l'épreuve de la répétition, Limit(e) Beckett: Beckett at the Limit(e)* Vol. 0 (Spring 2010), 82–103.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Watt*, New York, Grove, 1953, 30.

absent, as if to point to the “angle of immunity”<sup>10</sup> which, situated behind the viewer’s back, allows for unified representation to take form in accordance with the laws of perspective. Movement here is considered independently of any notion of place or sight. The alternation between *north* and *south* involves that of the bust and each leg successively pointing in opposite directions. This splitting is itself enveloped in an overall division: in order to head from *west* to *east*, Watt must alternate between *north* and *south*, describing a line perpendicular to the former. He also advances in a pointedly paradoxical way: “headlong tardigrade.”<sup>11</sup> It thus seems that Watt does not move forward, but rather executes radiating gestures.

The adverbial complements are revealing: with each movement, Watt seeks to “turn” and “fling” “as far as possible.”<sup>12</sup> It is as if he were seeking, on the one hand, to attain maximal extension in space, in order to reach the point of absolute north or south and, on the other hand, to ascertain the limits of what Beckett calls elsewhere “the field of the possible.”<sup>13</sup> This also means that Watt’s walking supposes an initial, overall calculation, whereby he decides on a destination, and submits himself to the arduous task of “tacking”: accepting a form of detour that excludes any reference to tangible space.

#### ABSTRACTION

The abstract, geometrical division of space, which frames the movement of Beckett’s characters, is omnipresent in his work. In *What Where* and *...but the clouds...*, the cardinal points determine the playing area, while the woman in *Rockaby* searches for an *alter ego*, turning her eyes systematically along horizontal and vertical axes: “all eyes / all sides / high and low.”<sup>14</sup> Her “going to and fro” repeats the “come and go” motif that, in the *incipit* of *A Piece of Monologue*, is associated with the original inscription in human existence:<sup>15</sup> “Birth was the death of him. [...] From mammy to nanny and back. All the way. Banded back and forth. So ghastly grinning on.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Beckett: Film, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber & Faber, 2006, 324.

<sup>11</sup> Beckett: *Watt*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Disjecta*, London, John Calder, 1983, 139.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Rockaby*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 435.

<sup>15</sup> Taken, for example, from Job 1:7 (cf. Chris Ackerley’s notes on *Texts for Nothing*, Paris, *Lettres modernes* – Minard, *La Revue des Lettres modernes*; Série Samuel Beckett, no. 5, 2018, # 3.4).

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Beckett: *A Piece of Monologue*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 425.

This insistence on incessant movement shows that the presence of a body in space circumscribes a structural hole that allows for no rest.<sup>17</sup> As Connor has pointed out: “It is only Watt’s clownish imbalance that keeps him on the move.”<sup>18</sup> The physical dimension at stake in a precarious manner of walking is also one of Nauman’s preoccupations:

An awareness of yourself comes from a certain amount of activity and you can’t get it from just thinking about yourself. [...] So the films and some of the pieces that I did after that for videotapes were specifically about doing exercises in balance. I thought of them as dance problems without being a dancer, being interested in the kinds of tension that arise when you try to balance and can’t.<sup>19</sup>

Nauman is concerned with what is to be discovered about oneself as an irreducible exception from conceptual knowledge.

Watt’s manner of orienting himself in space can be seen in the light of Jacques Lacan’s imaginary register, illustrated by the apologue of the “mirror stage,” which does not only suppose the recognition by the infant of his image in the mirror. Indeed, to be complete, this construction also requires the “assent of the Other,” whereby the mother exchanges gazes with her child.<sup>20</sup> This enables an identification whereby the latter can henceforth see his body as a constituted whole, after having adopted his mother’s point of view as his own.

If, however, the mother does not communicate her desire for her infant, the latter can find himself bereft of such corporeal consistency. His place is indeed marked by the signifier, but he can experience difficulty fixing a point of identification in what fundamentally constitutes an endless chain. Instead of being able to orient himself in relation to an origin, he is left hoping that somewhere, somehow, he may perchance hit on “the right aggregate.”<sup>21</sup>

The fact that Watt is obliged to repeat the same actions in the absence of any stated goal suggests a process of “exhaustion,” in the spirit developed by Gilles Deleuze.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, the only limit to the extension of his movements is the point of physical possibility. On the other, he executes the

<sup>17</sup> We develop this point further, around the notion of the “cut,” in relation to *Endgame*. Llewellyn Brown: *The Monad and the Cut in Samuel Beckett’s Endgame*, *Sanglap* Vol. 4, No. 2 (January–February 2018), 55–79; online <http://sanglap-journal.in/index.php/sanglap/article/view/39> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Connor: *Shifting Ground*.

<sup>19</sup> Nauman in Kraynak: *Please pay attention please*, 142.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Lacan: *Le Séminaire*, Livre VIII, *Le Transfert*, Paris, Seuil, Champ freudien, 1991, 414.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Beckett: Text 8, *Texts for Nothing*, in *The Complete Short Prose: 1929–1989*, New York, Grove, 1995, 133.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze: *L’Épousé*, in *Quad [...] suivi de L’Épousé par Gilles Deleuze*, Paris, Minuit, 1992.



same actions “over and over again, many many times,” in order to arrive at his “destination,” whose obscure identity seems to be limited to the act of simply sitting down.<sup>23</sup>

Watt’s walk is also characterized by the excessively orderly spatial orientation adopted. Rather than proceeding at random, he aligns his movements with the four cardinal points, and honors them in a totally methodical order. Distinct from any embodied space, the importance of these directions resides in their having been instituted by the Other: the “treasury of language” offers them as a universal principle of orientation.<sup>24</sup> For want of being able to situate himself in reference to inhabited space, Watt is required to refer to coordinates that remain devoid of any human signification: *north* is not an object of perception.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Watt seeks a reference point in what is fundamentally a limitless universe that allows for no subjectivity. It is as if, for want of a complete bodily image, the subject were making an effort to pattern his movements on universal abstract coordinates, within which his restless walking could inscribe a frame.

#### NAUMAN’S GEOMETRICAL “BECKETT WALK”

Nauman’s “Beckett Walk” seems to be a transposition of Watt’s manner of walking. Hands held behind his back, bust straight, legs stiff — like those of Watt and Molloy<sup>26</sup> — Nauman’s point of articulation is located in his hips. Bust upright, and standing on one foot, he holds the other out at an angle, as if to seek the right direction; he then pivots and, once the orientation has been determined, tips over onto the other foot, his free leg and bust held horizontally. The process is repeated for the duration of roughly one hour. In the video, Nauman appears as a purely geometrical figure on a neutral grey-white background. Abstract geometry penetrates his body, dictating its movements. Nauman’s reading around behaviorism inspired his performances, pointing to an imperative demand for perfect, unthinking obedience.<sup>27</sup> While the studio itself appears reminiscent of Beckett’s “closed places,”<sup>28</sup> such as seen in *The Lost Ones*, for Nauman, it is like a reproduction of the “Skinner box,”

<sup>23</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Lacan’s “treasury [or thesaurus] of the signifier”. *Écrits*, Paris, Seuil, Le Champ freudien, 1966, 806.

<sup>25</sup> See Jean-Claude Milner: *The Tell-Tale Constellations*, trans. Christian R. Gelder, *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 9, 2016, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Beckett: *Molloy*, 45, 56.

<sup>27</sup> See Robert Storr: *An Incantation of Our Time, Bruce Nauman* (exposition, Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Paris, du 14 mars au 21 juin 2015), Paris, Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, 2015, 71.

<sup>28</sup> See Beckett: *Fizzle 3*, in *The Complete Short Prose*, 236.



where “[p]roperly administered rewards and punishments in a comparatively controlled environment [...] could achieve the same results with men and women.”<sup>29</sup>

Nauman executes his movements following the geometrical lines on the floor of his studio, in a space that assumes an abstract appearance owing to the camera being turned counter-clockwise at a 90° angle, partially voiding the image of its referential capacity. Three-dimensional space is flattened out: a black line around the base of the wall divides the image into roughly 1:3 proportions between wall and floor, with a white diagonal line across the floor. Nauman’s movements are thus situated in relation to an abstract grid, recalling Watt’s cardinal directions.

Nauman’s construction shows how such abstraction only exists as a function of subjective and bodily reality. Indeed, Gérard Wajcman points out that geometrical abstraction of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not only a means of liberation from figurative painting, but that painters such as Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian sought out “the paths of an emancipation from pictorial geometry with regards to geometry itself, either by tracing squares that were not really square, or by breaking straight lines.”<sup>30</sup> Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915) is a prime example, “marred” by its uneven edges traced freehand, so that it is only “grossly a square, a square from afar.”<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, in Nauman’s video, pointedly obeying the dictates of an abstract geometrical structure means producing a surplus: the part of human existence that remains excluded from strict conformity to commands. Wajcman notes that geometry “is not pure mathematics,”<sup>32</sup> “number devoid of meaning”; rather, “it is numbers in image” referring, in the final analysis, to the representation of the human body. Hubert Damisch states that perspective painting cannot be reduced to geometry, since it is “given to *be seen*, in the same way as any other object of the visible world.”<sup>33</sup> There is thus a split between geometry as abstract, and its embodiment in the image or any work of creation, so that subjectivity inevitably leaves a “blot”<sup>34</sup> on the object, to use Beckett’s own words.

<sup>29</sup> See Storr: *An Incantation for Our Time*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> Gérard Wajcman: *Fenêtre: chroniques du regard et de l'intime*, Lagrasse, Verdier, Philia, 2004, 129. Bruno Eble also notices Nauman leaving a margin between himself and the square: Bruno Eble: *Le Miroir sans reflet: considérations autour de l'œuvre de Bruce Nauman*, Ouverture philosophique, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001, 50.

<sup>31</sup> Gérard Wajcman: *L'Objet du siècle*, Lagrasse, Verdier, Philia, 1998, 47.

<sup>32</sup> Wajcman: *Fenêtre*, 127.

<sup>33</sup> Hubert Damisch: *L'Origine de la perspective*, Paris, Flammarion, Champs arts, 1987, 67–68.

<sup>34</sup> Beckett in Jonathan Kalb: *Beckett in Performance*, Cambridge University, 1989, 233.

## FOOTSTEPS

Nauman's pacing shows how the performer is not crushed by the abstract commands but asserts his human status. The extreme and unbroken duration (one hour) of the video is ceaselessly punctuated by his movements. The apparent uniformity resounds with the firm tramping and the scraping of his sole as he turns.<sup>35</sup> Nauman described this as "a tedious and complicated process to gain even a yard."<sup>36</sup> Connor points to the importance of physical weight involved: "Both Beckett's and Nauman's work is held or called by the ground. In both artists gravity exerts its pull everywhere, though not always visibly."<sup>37</sup>

This suggests a reversal of perspective whereby it is the body that gives grounding to visible space, "as though space would fade unless repeatedly made to start forth by the tread of the foot."<sup>38</sup> Nauman's pacing results from the imperious need to pound out space, in order to make it his, causing the apparently abstract construction to prove extremely concrete. It can be interpreted as a ritual<sup>39</sup> or "prayer"<sup>40</sup>: what Lacan calls *invocation*, defined as the way that, by speaking, the subject imposes silence on the vociferation of his original Other.<sup>41</sup> Nauman creates his own habitable space by stamping his feet.

Indeed, the "Beckett Walk" is a performance revealing force and determination,<sup>42</sup> as a result of the constraints imposed on the body: the stiff legs, exclusion of the arms, balancing systematically on one leg. The spectator shares in this activity, which can be read in the light of Beckett's remarks concerning *Not I*, a play he wanted "to work on the nerves of the audience,"<sup>43</sup> so the latter would "*share [Mouth's] bewilderment.*"<sup>44</sup> Nauman explains:

<sup>35</sup> Describing *Wall-Floor Positions* (1968), Kathryn Chiong speaks of the interval as "unendurable pause" and cites *Watt*. Kathryn Chiong: Nauman's Beckett Walk, *October* 86 (Autumn 1998), 64.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Ruth Burgon: Pacing the Cell: Walking and Productivity in the Work of Bruce Nauman, *Tate Papers*, no. 26, Autumn 2016. This echoes strangely Beckett's determination in creation, as if faced with a cliff, to "[g]ain a few miserable millimetres" (Beckett in Charles Juliet: *Rencontres avec Samuel Beckett*, Paris, P.O.L., 2007, 21).

<sup>37</sup> Connor: Shifting Ground.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Christina Grammatikopoulou: *Repetitive actions, mumbled whispers: Some notes on Bruce Nauman*, <http://interartive.org/2012/10/bruce-nauman-repetition> (accessed 21 April 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Beckett: *Disjecta*, 68.

<sup>41</sup> The *Shofar* sounded on Yom Kippur reminds the primordial father that he is dead. Jacques Lacan: *Le Séminaire*, Livre X, *L'Angoisse*, Paris, Seuil, Champ freudien, 2004, 282.

<sup>42</sup> Tiredness is explicitly a central element in this construction. Nauman in Kraynak: *Please pay attention please*, 142.

<sup>43</sup> Beckett in C. J. Ackerley – S. E. Gontarski (eds.): *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, New York, Grove, 2004, 411.

<sup>44</sup> Beckett in Maurice Harmon (ed.): *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, Cambridge [Mass.], Harvard University, 1998, 283.

If you really believe in what you're doing and do it as well as you can, then there will be a certain amount of tension — if you are honestly getting tired, or if you are honestly trying to balance on one foot for a long time, there has to be a certain sympathetic response in someone who is watching you. It is a kind of body response, they feel that foot and that tension.<sup>45</sup>

## OBSERVING

Nauman's "Beckett Walk" puts to use the "savage eye"<sup>46</sup> of the camera, echoing Beckett's own practice with television. For Beckett, the film and television camera represented intense violence, as he expressed it speaking of the camera "eye" in *Film*, whose gaze is "so acute and penetrating that it can't be endured."<sup>47</sup> Nauman's video is composed of one single long take, and the camera is devoid of any subjectivity that might be revealed by moving in relation to the performer.

Moreover, the video was not accomplished by a camera crew, but the artist by himself, in the same way as Beckett's characters are obliged to act as their "own other."<sup>48</sup> The camera enables Nauman, like Molloy, to "strut before [his own] eyes, like a stranger"<sup>49</sup>: to observe himself with the eyes of an anonymous spectator. Thus, as in Beckett's films for the television, the enunciative set-up is crucial: the artist places himself under the gaze of the camera, to be observed as an object from the point of view of the Other, a place occupied by the spectator. The impassive gaze involved inspires Ruth Burgon to evoke the notion of surveillance: indeed, Nauman started filming at the same time as CCTV was being installed in public spaces.<sup>50</sup> In this context, the object is a potential criminal, and "Nauman's studio videos are watched in a manner that attends only to occurrences outside the norm, that registers minute differences within the endless cycles of sameness."<sup>51</sup> The observing eye aims to catch a glimpse of a fleeting manifestation that, structurally, never ceases to escape.

Indeed, any idea of domination associated with surveillance is forcibly undercut. The spectator is subjected to a permanently distorted perception of space and context, because of the camera being tipped over at a 90° angle.

<sup>45</sup> Nauman in Kraynak: *Please pay attention please*, 148.

<sup>46</sup> Samuel Beckett: Suggestions for TV *Krapp* in Clas Zilliacus, Suggestions for TV *Krapp* by Samuel Beckett, in James Knowlson (ed.): *Theatre Workbook 1: Samuel Beckett, Krapp's Last Tape*, London, Brutus Books, 1980, 72.

<sup>47</sup> Beckett in S. E. Gontarski: *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts*, Bloomington, Indiana University, 1985, 188.

<sup>48</sup> Beckett: *Rockaby*, 441.

<sup>49</sup> Beckett: *Molloy*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> Burgon: *Pacing the Cell*, 5 and 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

An in-between space is created — echoing Beckett's "key word"<sup>52</sup> *perhaps* — where the spectator oscillates from a purely formal to a figurative conception of space, for want of reference to stable, "normal" reality. Secondly, the spectator is limited to a partial view, which excludes the overall layout. As he cannot detach himself from the strict image that is offered, he is not free to reduce the performance to a conceptual dimension, or to endow it with "meaning." Indeed, if Nauman himself seemed to be imprisoned within the geometrical space of his studio, it is now the spectator who is reduced to passivity: he is immobilized by the single fixed take, whereas cuts and changes of perspective would have circumscribed his place in the intervals.

The strictly limited visual field produces the effect of an anamorphosis: deformations produced by a change in the point of view, rendering the original image unrecognizable.<sup>53</sup> For example, in architecture, a fresco in a cupola will be distorted to recover a recognizable shape when seen from below. However, constructed forms can easily be deconstructed, once an unorthodox point of view is imposed on the spectator. For Lacan, the anamorphosis reveals the way a coherent image can collapse when seen from the point of view that remains unimaginable for the subject, revealing the point from which the latter is seen, as an object of his Other's unknowable desire.

In Nauman's video, the effect of the anamorphosis is present in the changing shape of the performer which, flattened out on the screen, fails to coagulate into a coherent three-dimensional being. His stylized body appears to border on the formless, folding and unfolding. His body thus appears as a fascinating blot, creating a breach in the surrounding space.

Moreover, the geometrical diagrams created by Nauman to organize his movements show two forms that, so to speak, reflect each other.<sup>54</sup> It is as if the angles served as pivot-points, so that their sides open up like doors in an architectural plan. These very orderly and abstract forms appear to correspond to the geometrical movements of Watt, being patterned on the signifiers ordained by the Other. However, this dimension disappears in the video, as a result of the camera angle, since the spectator is obliged to observe from a point of view closer to the ground. One sees the geometrical movements of Nauman's body, but not the specific form that these movements describe. The invisible pattern can be likened to the equally invisible form in the center

<sup>52</sup> Beckett cited in Tom Driver, *Beckett by the Madeleine*, in *Columbia University Forum* IV (Summer 1961), 23.

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Lacan: *Le Séminaire*, Livre VII, *L'Éthique de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, Champ freudien, 1986, 161. Lacan comes back to this structure later: *Le Séminaire*, Livre XI, *Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, Le Champ freudien, 1973, 80–83.

<sup>54</sup> *Beckett Walk Diagram II*, 1968–1969, reproduced: Gijs van Tuyl: *Condition humaine/corps humain*: Bruce Nauman et Samuel Beckett, in Christine Van Assche: *Nauman Bruce: image/texte*, 1966–1996, Paris, Centre Georges-Pompidou, 1997, 60.

of the stage in *Quad* — “E supposed a danger zone”<sup>55</sup> — marked only by the abrupt swerving of the dancers. We could call such invisible squares Beckett and Nauman’s version of Malevich’s painting, of which Gérard Wajcman states: “The *Black Square* is the absence of an object, how to put it, embodied. It is this absence.”<sup>56</sup>

Rather than commanding the scene, the spectator is immobilized and powerless: one is reduced to the status of a voyeur observing through a keyhole, rather than one situated at the center of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. What is offered up to the spectator’s gaze is limited to what appears within a narrow angle. Nauman thus appears as an uncontrollable being, since he escapes this space: he leaves the field of vision, moving not only across the screen but also backwards and forwards in relation to the camera. Nauman bores a hole in the gaze of the camera, as if he were taunting it: he possesses much more freedom than the spectator since, at certain moments, he crosses over the field of vision, leaving only parts of his body (torso, legs, back, head) visible. Sometimes the frame is empty, and the spectator is unable to follow him. Nauman explains: “Part of the activity takes place within the range of the camera, and part of it out of the range of the camera. You can see that the room is larger and the only contact you have is the sound of the activity, and then finally the figure comes back into the range of the camera.”<sup>57</sup> The space that remains out of reach also escapes the visual control of the spectator.<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, as Connor<sup>59</sup> and François Albera<sup>60</sup> observe, all of Nauman’s movements appear to be accomplished in defiance of the laws of gravity, as he gives the impression of walking up and down a vertical wall — headfirst — as a result of the camera angle. This counterbalances his pounding feet, and the dull but luminous décor confers on the image a dream-like quality, as if it were withdrawn from worldly space and time. Nauman explains that the video was intended to be endless: “My idea at that time was that the film should have no beginning or end: one should be able to come in at any time and nothing would change.”<sup>61</sup> This experience of timelessness is reinforced by the unbroken sound of the machine recording. What appears on the screen thus remains totally autonomous, as if situated in another space, escaping the spectator’s control. This autonomy produces a strange fascination in the

<sup>55</sup> Beckett: *Quad* in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 453.

<sup>56</sup> Wajcman: *L’Objet du siècle*, 95. Wajcman undertook a similar exercise in his novel *L’Interdit* (Paris, Nous, 2016 [republishation]) where the running titles and the constant footnotes frame the text which, as such, is missing, appearing only as the blank page.

<sup>57</sup> Nauman in Kraynak: *Please pay attention please*, 310.

<sup>58</sup> See François Albera: Nauman cinématique, in *Nauman Bruce: image/texte, 1966–1996*, Paris, Centre Georges-Pompidou, 1997, 53.

<sup>59</sup> Connor: *Shifting Ground*.

<sup>60</sup> Albera: Nauman cinématique, 53.

<sup>61</sup> Nauman in Kraynak: *Please pay attention please*, 146.

spectator. Nauman thus pins his Other down — the spectator is suspended on the artist's actions, and the rhythm he adopts — using the camera as a device permitting him to fix the untamable gaze of his Other.<sup>62</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Viewing the video “Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)” shows how, in reading Beckett, Bruce Nauman encountered preoccupations with which he felt a great affinity. While the passages dealing with walking in *Watt* and *Molloy* remain descriptions in prose, some of Beckett's works for the theatre — notably *Footfalls* and *Quad* — reveal the very concrete and physical dimension such action represented for him.

While Nauman is himself the performer in his videos — contrary to Beckett, who works with actors and dancers — the subjective relation to the body remains absolutely primordial for both, including Beckett's texts.<sup>63</sup> The works of both creators involve the body pared down to its insistent and indomitable dimension, whereby the imperative command to execute precise and abstractly dictated actions reveals the core of existence to be situated beyond the comforting perception of the body as a whole. Indeed, the latter engenders a symmetry whereby the subject envisages himself as facing an orderly and meaningful world, a reflection of his own unity as represented in a mirror. This raises the risk of being captivated by one's own image. Once this dimension has been discarded, what remains is the pure determination — devoid of any specific goal — to confront the body as governed by language beyond meanings, desire or identity. This appears as the untameable dimension that drives or causes the pacing, and that escapes the spectator's field of vision. This process reveals how active human presence produces a deformation that subverts abstract order.

For Nauman and for Beckett, the medium utilized is also an integral part of the construction, since the presence of the camera conditions the artist's address to the spectator: he produces himself as an object, subjected to the gaze of the Other. As spectator, the latter is called on to experience an effect on himself, similar to that of the performer. What is created is thus not simply an image, but an empty hole that is circumscribed by the interaction

<sup>62</sup> As Gérard Wajcman has pointed out in relation to the 1973 work: *Pay attention mother fuckers*. Wajcman: *Mother Fuckers*, 13–15.

<sup>63</sup> Bruno Geneste points out how Beckett's writing aims at producing an effect on the body. Samuel Beckett: *l'“entre” vivifiant de la langue et l'hiatus sinthomatique: contrer ces vérités du Surmoi*, 89–116 in L. Brown [dir.], *La Violence dans l'œuvre de Samuel Beckett*, Paris, Lettres modernes – Minard; Série Samuel Beckett, no. 4, 2017.



of the various poles involved:<sup>64</sup> the creator is distinct from the image he produces of himself in the video, where he sees himself as another; the camera produces an image that the spectator does not control but that, on the contrary, points to his own powerlessness. Neither spectator nor creator is able to capture or rationalize the part that escapes: the unseen that each one attempts to discern by scrutinizing the strange form on the screen.

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<sup>64</sup> This is summed up by Gérard Wajcman in a diagram where the summits of a triangle (spectator, work of art and author) circumscribe the place of the object in the center (*L'Objet du siècle*, 68).



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# TRANSLATING SILENCE: CORRELATIONS BETWEEN BECKETT, CHEKHOV, AND HIRATA

—◀—  
YOSHIKO TAKEBE

## ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to demonstrate what it means to translate silence by analyzing correlations between three renowned playwrights: Samuel Beckett, Anton Chekhov, and Oriza Hirata. Anton Chekhov is considered to be Beckett's predecessor in terms of deviating from the unities of time, place and action for drama, as defined by Aristotle in Poetics. Silence is one of the live substances that constitutes the theatre produced by Beckett, Chekhov, and Hirata. The tranquility of theatre is pervasive in the plays of these three playwrights, regardless of time and place. Although the target audiences differ from Europe to Asia, serenity written in the source texts is a timeless component, and its translation requires the utmost attention. Whether performed by human or machine, the translation of silence from source language into target language determines the critical moment at which catharsis will be experienced without any dramatic outcome or clear-cut conclusion.*

## INTRODUCTION

When a written text is three-dimensionally translated on the stage, the ways in which a playwright insists upon the role of silence become more evident. According to the biography of Beckett by James Knowlson, "The inspiration for such a use of silence could have come from an instinctive response to Strindberg's or Chekhov's theatre, or from a philosophical meditation as to how Democritus' 'nothing is more real than nothing' could be rendered in the theatre."<sup>1</sup> The aesthetics of silence inherited from Chekhov is even more evident when the work is translated into Japanese.

The use of silence by Chekhov in the nineteenth century which influenced Beckett in the twentieth century has remained alluring for modern Japanese dramatists in the twenty-first century, particularly Oriza Hirata. The works

<sup>1</sup> James Knowlson: *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London, Bloomsbury, 1996, 380.

of Hirata are categorized as “quiet theatre” that emphasizes the presence of silence as natural, as realistic, to the contemporary audience. They exclude dramatic consistency, opting instead for a plotless atmosphere. Put otherwise, Hirata seeks to impress his audience by deconstructing the three unities and by creating situations that are closer to our daily lives.

This paper aims to explore the significance of translating silence from one language to another by focusing on the relationship between the aforementioned three playwrights; Beckett’s *Come and Go* and its translation into the style of Japanese Noh Theatre in order to demonstrate the intersemiotic translation strategy in play; how Beckett’s dramaturgy is influenced by Chekhov’s theatre, by comparing the theatrical structure of Beckett’s *Come and Go* and Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters*; and how Hirata adapted Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* to Japanese android drama in order to reveal silence shared between humans and machines.

#### TRANSLATING SILENCE IN SILENT MOVIES IN JAPAN

When actors actually adapt the words in the text to their own voices and physical movements, they are required to be conscious of nonverbal elements as well. In the time of silent movies, they must have acted with non-verbal elements more in their mind, and how to convey such non-verbal elements shown in silent movies must have been an important element for Beckett in writing his plays. During his years at Trinity College Dublin, Beckett is said to have seen many Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin films. As stated by Knowlson, the “love of old music hall and circus routines was to remain with him and resurface later.”<sup>2</sup> Before discussing Japanese productions of Beckett and Chekhov, this section briefly addresses a device unique to Japan for translating the aesthetics of silence in silent movies.

When silent movies were imported to Japan in earlier days, *Benshi* played the role of translator and interpreter for understanding the content of silent movies. *Benshi* is “the famous screen-side narrator of Japanese silent film who both offered narrative commentary and mimicked the voices of the characters.”<sup>3</sup> *Benshi* stood next to the screen and told the story by looking at screen and audience by turns. Few subtitles were displayed in conjunction with each scene of the silent movies. *Benshi* wrote a script that summarized the content of the movie. He expressed through speech not only the actors’ words, but also various sound effects projected on the screen. When the actor in the movie cried, he too displayed a tearful face. He expressed and

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>3</sup> Abe Mark Nornes: For An Abusive Subtitling, in Lawrence Venuti (ed.): *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New York, Routledge, 1999/2004, 454.

performed various characters' personalities and emotions through shifting facial expressions, gestures and voices. In addition, the orchestra was also in the movie theater, and they played music to accompany the *Benshi*, while also providing sound effects.

Thus, the most significant effect of *Benshi* is that he provides voices to the voiceless. In other words, such non-verbal aspects as facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice are communicated by *Benshi* in such a way as to effectively convey the verbal message of silent movies. Although Beckett was not *Benshi*, his uniqueness lies in the way in which he gave voices to the voiceless.

#### SILENCE IN BECKETT'S *COME AND GO*

When Beckett is analyzed in relation to Chekhov, the process of waiting for an unexpected hope in *Waiting for Godot* is often compared to the similar situation in *The Three Sisters*. As explained by Tomio Yamanouchi, "The most direct form of Beckettian elements represented in Chekhov most deeply is undoubtedly *The Three Sisters*. The three sisters, who hope to escape from the tedious monotonous days in the provincial city and to spend a new vibrant life in Moscow, end up with frustration and passing of their time."<sup>4</sup> According to Kunihiro Yamamoto, "depicting the human existence surely means depicting the passage of time. In this sense, the Russian Chekhov had already produced such a play more than half a century before Beckett."<sup>5</sup> Such analyses focus on the absurdity and plotlessness of the two plays, in which characters never stop talking in order to pass the time as they wait for Godot to arrive or themselves to go to Moscow. Instead of examining the similarities in these situations of waiting, this section and the following parts of this essay highlight how silence is effectively employed in the Japanese productions through discussions of "intersemiotic translation," that is, "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems"<sup>6</sup> by scrutinizing plays that feature three women: Beckett's *Come and Go* and Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*.

Beckett's *Come and Go* utilizes silence to enhance the sequential entrances and exits of three women who whisper about the one of them who is not on stage at the time. In the Japanese Noh version by NOHO Theatre Company

<sup>4</sup> Tomio Yamanouchi: *Vision of Drama*, Tokyo, Hakuosha, 1997, 125; my translation.

<sup>5</sup> Kunihiro Yamamoto: *Adventures of Twentieth Century Theatre Challenging the Poetics by Aristotle Samuel Beckett, Terayama Shuji, Bertold Brecht in Annual Bulletin of Research and Education at Nara Women's University Department of Literature 1* (2005), Nara Women's University 92; my translation.

<sup>6</sup> Roman Jakobson: *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, in Lawrence Venuti (ed.): *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New York, Routledge, 1959/2004, 139.

performed at Oe Noh Theatre in Kyoto in 2004, the lines were spoken as Japanese operatic chants accompanied by Japanese instruments and chorus. It is worthwhile to compare this complex operatic setting of *Come and Go* with the Noh device of the protagonist called *Shite* and the supporting actor called *Waki*.

In *Come and Go*, the character spoken of in the third person as “she” remains invisible and absent from the stage. The alternation between the whisperer and the listener is reflected in that of the *Shite* and *Waki* of the Noh play. With the aid of a bamboo flute called *Shakuhachi*, the three women in kimono beautifully adopted Noh ‘*kata*’ for exits and entrances, whispering, and for the final clasping of hands by the three women. On the whole, the silent atmosphere and the rhythmic pattern and form of *Come and Go* matched well with the style of Noh drama. On the one hand, since *Come and Go* includes a scene where three women reunite and talk about their old school days, which is more natural, realistic and familiar to the audience, this play may be categorized as “realistic Noh” (*genzai Noh*) as opposed to “fantasy Noh” (*mugen Noh*). While *Come and Go* depicts women who live in the same world as the audience, most of Beckett’s later “ghost” plays can be interpreted through “fantasy Noh.” Yasunari Takahashi referred to *Rockaby*, “[o]ne of the most curious moments in the play occurs when the woman joins the voice, speaking in unison: “time she stopped.” Although one is reminded of Krapp joining in the laughter of the recorded voice, the closest parallel one can think of will probably be the impression one gets when the *Shite* in Noh joins the chorus to recite the third-person narrative describing him.”<sup>7</sup>

While this play seems to be more realistic and familiar compared to Beckett’s other later plays, *Come and Go* still contains important elements of silence found in Noh drama such as the use of symbolism and *yugen*, the aesthetics of quiet elegance. The repetition of gestures, which are “the noiseless exit, the shifting of positions on the bench, the leaning over to whisper in the other’s ear, the significant look, the finger to the lips”<sup>8</sup> creates a piece of harmonious poetic sentiment. The final line by Flo, “I can feel the rings,”<sup>9</sup> suggests the eternal shape of a circle. The combination of the invisible rings and the joined hands of the three women “emphasizes both the figures’ absorption in a dream world (where they do wear rings) and the absence and lack of definition of their actual existence.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Yasunari Takahashi: Qu’est-ce qui arrive? Some Structural Comparisons of Beckett’s Plays and Noh, in Morris Beja – S. E. Gontarski – Pierre Astier (eds.): *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*, Columbus, Ohio State University, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Anna McMullan: *Theatre on Trial: Samuel Beckett’s Later Drama*, London, Routledge, 1993, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Beckett: *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1986, 355.

<sup>10</sup> McMullan: *Theatre on Trial*, 87.

The silence is enhanced by the absence of the third person, and the ritualistic pattern in the silent atmosphere is represented by whispering and astonishment. This exchange of roles can be seen as that of the protagonist (*Shite*) and the supporting actor (*Waki*). When they change places, similar to *suriashi*, shuffling with sliding feet in Noh dance, “their feet make no sound. Beckett notes that they should not be seen to leave the stage.”<sup>11</sup> In this way, each woman in turn becomes the central figure of the play by entering and leaving the stage in silence. Viewed in the light of the categorization of Noh drama, *Come and Go* uniquely belongs to both “realistic Noh” and “fantasy Noh” as two of the three women onstage play the role of *Waki* to purge the agonies of the ghostlike third woman. The effective use of silence is discovered in this double structure of Noh drama.<sup>12</sup>

#### SILENCE IN CHEKHOV'S *THE THREE SISTERS* IN COMPARISON WITH HIRATA'S PRODUCTION

Like Beckett, Chekhov emphasizes absurdity and silent atmosphere onstage. While the three women in Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* are represented realistically with their social background because they are given a more specific, or concrete, situation and relationships, those in Beckett's *Come and Go* look more like identical objects wearing the same costume in different colors without detailed status. This section focuses on how silence in *The Three Sisters* is beneficial for understanding Beckett's dramaturgy as well as Hirata's.

We can say that silence is given prominence not only by Beckett but also by Chekhov in that in their works, “a love of solitude, stillness, and silence has no necessary connection with a religious impulse, since these preferences are found in people of all faiths and none.”<sup>13</sup> The three sisters, who talk a lot to pass the time, indulge in but are also tired of their stagnant situation, which may be symbolized as their waiting in silence with their hope for a new life in Moscow. On the contrary, the characters in Beckett's *Come and Go* represent silence itself through their non-verbal movements, gestures and costumes, as well as through the lighting and stage props.

As analyzed by Tomio Yamanouchi, “the lives of the characters in Chekhov's drama are full of absurdity, and it may well be said that his plays are theatre of the absurd in modern realism,”<sup>14</sup> which implies that Chekhov was the predecessor

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>12</sup> This section is based on my paper, i. e. Yoshiko Takebe: Analysis of Beckettian Noh for Contemporary Performing Art, *Shujitsu English Studies* 30 (2014), 229–243.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Bryden: *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God*, London, Macmillan, 1998, 178.

<sup>14</sup> Tomio Yamanouchi: *Dramaturgy*, Tokyo, Kinokuniya, 1979, 103; my translation.



of Beckett. Indeed, “[t]hose characteristics of Chekhov’s plays including weariness, purposelessness, stagnancy, boredom, going round and round without ever getting to the point all became the elements of Beckett’s drama.”<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, Hirata adapted Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* into an android drama by setting its time in the near future, and its place in a provincial city in Japan. Hirata’s *The Three Sisters* was performed in 2012 not only in Tokyo but also in France and Spain. The nineteenth-century Russian drama was reproduced in the form of an ultramodern, experimental work that transcends the space between drama and science.

By including an android as the youngest of the three sisters on the stage, the non-verbal modalities are more emphasized, encouraging the actors and the audience to become more conscious of what it means to be human. As examined by Hirata, an android appears to be a real human being when it is able to embody what scientists call “noises.” When a human being performs an action, extra “noises” or movements such as pauses or breaths occur, which are called “micro-slips” in the field of cognitive psychology. These extra movements should neither add too much nor too little, and good actors are supposed to be able to control them unconsciously.<sup>16</sup>

In order to create an android that performs these “noises,” Hirata was supported by Hiroshi Ishiguro, a scientist at the forefront of robotics, whose research focuses on androids. They worked together on programming noises at random to enable an android to behave naturally. The tedious, dead-end situation in *The Three Sisters* was accentuated through the mechanical voices, pauses, and silences of an inorganic android. For the scenes involving the human actors and the android, there was a mixture of live movement and recorded input gestures by the android. As analyzed by Ishiguro, “The human actors developed their attitudes toward the android over the course of rehearsals. They discovered what kind of physical actions they take when they treat the android either as a human or as a non-human. The director also realized through their dialogues that the implementation of an android onto the stage enhances various potentialities for understanding multimodal, multi-layered communication in the theatre.”<sup>17</sup>

In adaptation, non-verbal modalities play a key role in conveying the original themes and motifs of the source text. As the three women in *Come and Go* were provided with accurate timings of the pauses and gestures in the original text by Beckett, Japanese Noh conventions (such as stylized pattern

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>16</sup> Oriza Hirata: *From Misunderstanding: What is Communication?*, Tokyo, Kodansha, 2012, 62–63.

<sup>17</sup> Hiroshi Ishiguro: Multimodal Analysis on Android Drama of *The Three Sisters*: How Humans Interact with Android, *The Journal of The Japan Association for Artificial Intelligence Studies*, Vol. 29, No.1 (2014), 66–67; my translation.

of restricted movement called *kata*, shuffling with sliding feet called *suriashi*) were utilized to reveal the beauty of silent modalities. For the android version of *The Three Sisters*, Hirata unveiled new possibilities of converting the verbal signs written by Chekhov into the scientifically programmed postures, gestures, and voices. In the future, it is expected that the android will be able to create more natural variations by responding and reacting in real time on the stage, just like human beings. It is then that the original silence written in Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* becomes more realistic to twenty-first century audiences, by maintaining both stagnation and hope for the future.<sup>18</sup>

At the post-performance session of *The Three Sisters*, Hirata explained about his performance as follows: "By including the android, the play becomes neither dark nor bright. I represent that there are neither dream, hope, nor despair. That also means both hope and despair are here."<sup>19</sup> The actress whose voice and movements had been programmed and recorded for the android as the youngest sister, described the android as her "twin sister,"<sup>20</sup> her alter ego, and said that she "was able to see herself acting onstage from the audience."<sup>21</sup> Regarding the difference between acting with humans and with an android, the actress who played the role of the oldest sister answered that "it was easier than she thought because the android existed not only with voice but also with movements of hands and head. There was an excitement in playing the same musical notes from the same musical score together."<sup>22</sup> The actress who performed as the second sister commented that she "consciously tried to look at the android on purpose to have conversations with her in order to create such natural atmosphere as for dialogues with humans."<sup>23</sup> Thus, the presence of the android adds to Chekhov's and Hirata's concept of silence the more profound question of what it means to be human beyond the centuries.

#### CORRELATIONS BETWEEN BECKETT, CHEKHOV, AND HIRATA

As opposed to those characters delineated by Chekhov's realism in the theatre, Beckett does not provide any specific social background or history for his characters on the stage. Nevertheless, Beckett inherits the strategy of silence from his predecessor in order to question the *raison d'être* of the characters.

<sup>18</sup> This section is based on my Japanese paper: Yoshiko Takebe: Potentialities of Non-linguistic Modalities in Adaptations of Western Drama, in *Invitation to Translation Studies* 14 (2015), 107–118.

<sup>19</sup> Oriza Hirata: Post-Performance Talk 2, *The Three Sisters*, Dir. Oriza Hirata, Perf. Hiroko Matsuda, Mizuho Nojima, Minako Inoue, DVD, Theatre Television, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Minako Inoue: Special Talk, *The Three Sisters*, Dir. Oriza Hirata, DVD, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Hiroko Matsuda: Cast Interview, *The Three Sisters*, Dir. Oriza Hirata, DVD, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Mizuho Nojima: Cast Interview, *The Three Sisters*, Dir. Oriza Hirata, DVD, 2013.

Like the characters in Beckett's plays, the protagonists in Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* merely wait to go to Moscow, although there are, compared to Beckett's monotonous plot, more realistic dramatic events happening offstage that can logically be explained and which are relevant to the characters onstage, effectively drawing attention to the unchanged situation of the three sisters. This aesthetics of silence has in turn influenced the work of Hirata. He has established his "quiet theatre," in which the plays are performed overseas and are particularly popular in France.

While Chekhov and Beckett both incorporate absurdity and a silent structure onstage, Hirata makes these elements more familiar, realistic, modern, and more suited to the lives of the twenty-first-century audience. Especially in his android version of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, the nineteenth-century drama has been adapted into a near-future society for the twenty-first-century audience, where silence will be ubiquitously found in the universe more mechanical and inhuman.

Trusting the eloquence of silence onstage, the representations depicted by Chekhov and Hirata are similar to Beckett's characters, however, in the sense that they "are trapped in a tragedy of language, not of action"<sup>24</sup> and that they "are traumatized, alienated, frequently dismembered, a foreign body charged with wayward energies, refused any unproblematic access to language, and, consequently, foreigners within it."<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, in the cases of Chekhov and Hirata as well as Beckett, translating the spoken lines of the characters into Japanese — whether non-verbal language or the mechanical language of an android — reveals the verbal impotence and dysfunction contained in the drama. On the other hand, translating the stage directions for movements, gestures, sounds, costumes, setting, lighting, and pauses discloses the non-verbal depth and richness of the theatrical aesthetics.

Thus, the static atmosphere created by the nineteenth-century Chekhov was not only inherited by the twentieth century Beckett but also emphasized by the twenty-first century Hirata in the android version of *The Three Sisters*.

Hirata, who attempts to fill in the gap between expressions on the stage and our real life, aims to represent chaotic situations through verbal lines and physical movements onstage that emulate our modern reality, rather than faithfully following the social background of the play. While Chekhov illustrated solitude, stillness, and silence as the themes of his drama, Beckett employed these elements as the physical, non-verbal characteristics of his theatrical aesthetics. In other words, Chekhov deals with characters who

<sup>24</sup> Sinéad Mooney: Foreign Bodies, in: *A Tongue Not Mine: Beckett and Translation*, Oxford, Oxford University, 2011, 170.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

are dissatisfied with their silent situation while Beckett demonstrates how those figures in silence ultimately mirror the audiences who watch the play in darkness, silently, at the theatre.

Hirata adapted the essence of Chekhov and Beckett by treating the themes of solitude, stillness, and silence in *The Three Sisters* as well as by introducing an android as the means of heightening the mechanical, empty, silent atmosphere. Consequently, Beckett was influenced by Chekhov's absurd situations and in turn influenced Hirata, in terms of having actors relate with new technology in the theatre.

These three dramatists gave special weight to silence to highlight the distinction between verbal and non-verbal elements. It may well be said that the dramatists enabled the characters to play a theatrical role similar to that of the *Benshi* for silent movies discussed in the beginning of this paper. Ultimately, Beckett wanted to present every scene in silence as if the audience were watching a silent movie. It may well be that Beckett chose silent techniques to demonstrate those motifs that had already been treated by Chekhov by adding a few lines and gestures like a *Benshi*. In other words, Beckett treated his plays as if they were silent movies accompanied by a *Benshi* who physically explained the content of the works on the stage. Like a *Benshi*, who mediates between the silent movie and the audience while accompanied by orchestral music, the characters are able to observe their situations from outside. This sense of being somewhere in between blurs the boundaries between the stage and the audience. The characters are equipped with extra space and silence which allows them to be conscious of their own *raison d'être*. This strategy enables the characters to be more physical and three-dimensional by removing the barriers between the stage and audience, unreal and real, verbal and non-verbal, source language and target language, and voice and voiceless.

#### CONCLUSION

Although on the surface the characters of Beckett, Chekhov and Hirata seem to be mired in despair, there are simultaneously expectations and hope implied on the stage. Silence becomes visible for the audience not through the verbal lines but through pauses, gestures, facial expressions, paces, costumes, lighting, and stage props. These non-verbal aspects are entirely supported by the aesthetics of silence discussed in this chapter. At the same time, it may still be difficult for readers of the three playwrights to comprehend the nuance between verbal and non-verbal aspects from the two-dimensional written text. However, once they witness the three-dimensional stage audio-visually, they are more able to grasp this hidden message. By treating silence

as one of the live entities on the stage, the dramaturgy allows the audience to observe that silence brings optimistic hope and laughter along with anxiety and boredom. Whether Chekhov's nineteenth-century realism in the theatre adapted into a twenty-first century android drama or Beckett's twentieth-century theatre of the absurd transformed into a Japanese traditional performing art, translating silence holds the most crucial key for savoring the masterpiece. This chaotic mixture of contradictory elements, which is true to our own lives, is aesthetically dramatized by Beckett, Chekhov and Hirata, who trust and benefit from the existence of silence.

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PART 3: *PRACTITIONER VOICES*





## HOW WE MADE THE HUNGARIAN VERSION OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S *ALL THAT FALL*

MÁRTON MESTERHÁZI

### ABSTRACT

*Under the politically and culturally tricky conditions in Hungary in 1967, the idea of producing a Beckett play was only accepted "because the Czech comrades have already produced it." The Head of Drama of Hungarian Radio insisted on using the French translation (by Robert Pinget) with some corrections on the basis of the original. All That Fall was accepted by Drama Council. Studio work began: erratic explanations by director, but a cast of geniuses — the comedians' instinct working wonders. In the process of editing, the Head of Drama instructed us to use the sound effects of "the Czech comrades." It was broadcast on 11 January 1968, Late Night Radio Theatre. A modest bit of sensation arose in professional circles. Experiments in stereophony — the production team was unhappy about the sound effects. Then the new Head of Drama agreed: sound effects were exchanged for ones of our own selection.*

"Tell a story," said Martin Esslin on radio drama.<sup>1</sup> So here follows the story of how we made Samuel Beckett's *All That Fall* in Hungarian. The year is 1967. The last of the imprisoned intellectuals like István Bibó<sup>2</sup> or Árpád Göncz<sup>3</sup> had been amnestied in 1963 and found a modest living. The famous sentence of János Kádár,<sup>4</sup> originally pronounced in 1961 (at a session of the National Council of the Patriotic Popular Front), "Whoever is not against us is with us," sounded nearly logical by that time. Czech, Hungarian, and Polish economists cooperated to construct a workable model of an economically efficient Socialism: in earnest and publicly.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Esslin's words at the opening lecture of the EBU radio drama workshop in Edinburgh, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> István Bibó (1911–1979) jurist, historian, essayist; imprisoned 1957–1963.

<sup>3</sup> Árpád Göncz (1922–2015) jurist, translator, author; imprisoned 1957–1963. President of the Hungarian Republic 1990–2000.

<sup>4</sup> János Kádár (1912–1989) Communist politician; imprisoned 1952–1954. First Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party between 1958 and 1988, practically the most powerful man in Hungary at the time.

As regards the special field of our cultural life, world literature, these were glorious years for editors and translators. I would not try to review the activity of the well-funded Európa Publishing,<sup>5</sup> staffed with the best brains of the profession; it is worth a heroic epic. Even the more modest monthly literary journal *Nagyvilág* (shamefully killed off in 1948, the year of the Stalinist take-over, resuscitated in 1956),<sup>6</sup> often the vanguard of Európa Publishing, produced excellent full-text translations: Malamud, Bellow, Spark, Capote, Mailer, Camus' *Caligula*, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* — examples picked from 1965–67; while the *Orientation* and *Book Review* columns gave good information about fresh developments all over the world.

Of course, there were serious limits to euphoric liberty: the Warsaw Treaty<sup>7</sup> was to be mentioned with superlative praise only, the presence of Soviet troops taken as non-existent, the system of party-rule as the rule of the working class in the framework of socialist democracy. Names like Koestler or Orwell were to be avoided, even in normal conversation.

What about Samuel Beckett? His name did not provoke hostility from the cultural regime, but only received caution. “Favor – tolerate – ban” was the party rule; he was tolerated or became so sooner or later. *Nagyvilág* was the first to publish his work *La dernière bande* (*Krapp's Last Tape*) in June 1962. Then *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) followed, in *Nagyvilág* again, in August 1965, which was also staged at the Thália Theater on 1 November 1965; directed by Károly Kazimir,<sup>8</sup> a moderately talented but highly reliable comrade.

In that autumn *Nagyvilág* opened a discussion on *Godot*, which went on in several numbers, and then was closed by an *Editor's Statement*, a shrewd philosophical-ideological analysis condemning the author's lack of a constructive message: a *fig-leaf*, of course, as useful as it was commendable (I will explain the dubiously funny term later). The Drama Department of Hungarian Radio, with the separate Literature and Entertainment Departments, followed suit with some moderation.

Here, I enter the story and will explain how I became involved in the work of producing Beckett. With a fresh degree in Hungarian, English, and French, I received the job of script editor (dramaturg) in the Drama Department (Radio Theatre) of Hungarian Radio, in 1964. The Head of Drama, Viktor Gábor, former manager of Hungarian Army Publishers, was an intelligent person, not without

<sup>5</sup> Európa [Europe] Publishing is a literary publishing house with great traditions. Its predecessor was established in 1946, and it has been operating under its current name since 1957. Európa has been the most prestigious publishing house of world literature in Hungary. In its heyday the English department counted ten editors.

<sup>6</sup> Closed in 2015. A small but able staff, one person per language territory.

<sup>7</sup> Military organization (1955–1991), under Soviet command, of the (so-called) Socialist countries.

<sup>8</sup> Károly Kazimir was the Head Artistic Director of Thália Theatre from 1961, later became its Managing Director.

talent for the genre of drama, who had a competent knowledge of French; and a staunch party-soldier, a faithful follower of the current ideological line (however crooked), with the usual amount of worry and an unusual intensity of wakefulness. He had one ambition: he was obsessed with making the new, modern program-structure of the Radio. For this purpose he made the firm to subscribe to *Plays and Players*, and ordered me to review each number; plus translate, from cover to cover, the quarterly BBC *Radio Drama Booklet*.

Hungarian cultural institutions and workshops regularly received serious amounts of "raw material" from British (and probably French, Italian and so forth) publishers and other institutions. Even *Nagyvilág* received large parcels of books to be reviewed, eventually translated. Our Drama Department was sent each drama anthology the BBC published, plus the *Drama Booklet*. This listed every drama broadcast with date, duration, station, slot (for example, "Afternoon Theatre," "Morning Comedy"), recorded repeat, and, for more important (especially first) broadcasts, cast and a short synopsis. Translating the booklet was boring, but the information I acquired from it was immensely useful. Besides, whatever play-text I wanted to read (maybe to have translated — I soon knew several good translators) I received via our Foreign Relations Department. The amount went up to six to ten scripts every three to six months; as for the unwanted scripts, I sent them back to the BBC Play Library with thanks and regards via our Foreign Relations.

The university I went to was a timid one, heavily controlled by its own Party Committee: instruction in English language literature stopped at Thomas Hardy († 1928); T. S. Eliot was a forbidden fruit (as was our Lajos Kassák).<sup>9</sup> I read Beckett for the first time in *Nagyvilág*, with relish; then, already as script editor, read his radio-plays. I found them as well as Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* in the excellently furnished Ervin Szabó Library, two minutes' walk from the Radio building. I fell for *All That Fall* at first read: the richness of the text enchanted me. Driven by the hunter's natural instinct, I applied for its production.

The system for realizing the production was the following. Script Editor, in his own right, commissioned two Readers, and presented their (logically positive) reports to the Head of Drama. The Head of Drama, in his own right, gave or denied permission for commissioning a Translator, to be paid on reception and first reading of text. On reading the translation, the Head of Drama, in his own right, decided about submitting the text to the Drama Council, or dumping it as waste. The Drama Council consisted of the Head of Literature General Department, the Head of Drama, Assistant Head of Drama, Head Director and Assistant Head Director. The Submitting Script Editor participated without vote.

<sup>9</sup> Lajos Kassák (1887–1967) Poet, novelist, painter; important figure of the Hungarian avant-garde; he was a Socialist, but definitely a non-Communist.

And now, as I mentioned before, let me explain what I mean by *fig-leafing*. The Party Center (the apparatus of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party Central Committee) — the parallel government, which was more powerful than the civilian one — controlled every momentum of the country's life, thus Hungarian Radio, and, of course, our Drama Department. We were obliged to produce a yearly plan of program, which the Head of Drama and Assistant Head of Drama submitted to the competent Comrades in the Party Center building. Much later, as a result of a process of "democratization," the Comrades came to the Radio, to discuss, and eventually accept the plan. The program plan listed the plays to be recorded and broadcast, providing the name and nationality of the author, the title and a short synopsis (three to five lines) of the play. The "Comrades" controlled the "proportions" first. This meant the presence of minimum seven Soviet radio-plays or stage adaptations, two items from each OIRT country,<sup>10</sup> and about six British, French, and West-German plays.

An analysis of the themes (synopses) followed. What was required were the absence of anything ideologically destructive and the presence of something ideologically constructive. Judging the former (absence of anything ideologically destructive) was easy, while the latter (presence of something ideologically constructive) was actually incompatible with artistic autonomy. And here follows *fig-leafing*: chiefly in the synopses of our Hungarian authors, the pride of the Radio Theatre, especially if any of them wrote an original (not simply adapted) radio-play. Their synopses were decorated with gems like "deep humanism," "sincere solidarity," and "healthy critical spirit." Everybody in our cultural life acted similarly. It meant a safe journey; and was not exactly lying, only being insincere. Did the "Comrades" swallow our tricks? Who knows? They were probably satisfied with the knowledge that we were behaving.

Let us return to our mutttons with a very favorable development: in the meantime, Hungary — with the permission of the topmost (Soviet) authority — joined the European Broadcasting Union (EBU); as a result, Hungarian Radio, or, more precisely, our Drama Department, became a full member of the Prix Italia/Italia Prize contest, and submitted our first entry in the drama category, printing fifty copies of the text translated into English and French. Furthermore, Prix Italia expected every member to enter two radio-dramas (and two radio documentaries) every year, or to delegate a jury member with a good command of English or French; offered the opportunity to buy the two prize-winners or any other entry — and to sell our own — at short notice; and to make acquaintances, join informal discussions *ad libitum*. All this meant a significant broadening of our horizons, especially those of Gábor.

<sup>10</sup> Organisation Internationale de Radiodiffusion et Télévision: comprising the "Socialist" countries plus Finland and Yugoslavia.

When I first suggested *All That Fall* to him (presenting the two positive readers' reports), he accepted at once in principle, with the surprising comment: "The Czech comrades have already done it." Yes, the Prague Spring; and director Jiří Horčíčka<sup>11</sup> was one of the most recognized names in the profession, the cautious party-soldier with the *fig-leaf*. But more of the same followed: the worrying-watchful party-soldier prescribed that the translation be made from the French writer, Robert Pinget's *Tous ceux qui tombent*. As he knew some French, he thought maybe he would be able to check the reliability of the translation. He proposed Lajos Hársing,<sup>12</sup> who signed the contract, did the job, and was paid. I did not know that Beckett had been unhappy about Pinget's text, but I was unhappy with what I received myself, so I borrowed both texts from the Ervin Szabó Library, checked Hársing's translation against the original French, made a number of corrections, and then replaced weaker sentences with ones from Beckett's English original, which no one objected to. The text *Elesettek (All That Fall)* passed the Drama Council with flying colors: "The Czech comrades have already done it," and some of the members probably appreciated the quality too.

Assistant Head Director, Géza Varga was chosen for the production:<sup>13</sup> not an erudite man, but a dreamer of creating ideal sounds. At the first run-through rehearsal he told the actors some maladroit sentences and me some well-informed ones — both irrelevant. What the play required was the relevance of the actors. And Varga, now a dreamer of voices, ideal actors and actresses, rallied a cast I must introduce, trying to illustrate the greatness of at least the two protagonists. Mária Sulyok (1908–1987) received the role of Mrs Rooney: the grande dame of Hungarian theatre, hilarious in Ferenc Molnár's comedies, breathtaking in Greek tragedies, in István Örkény's plays — the heart and soul of our country, with a special dignity, elegance, and a faultless proficiency in German. Among her most memorable roles as an actress were Gertrude, Claire Zachanassian, Philomena, Hecuba and Mrs Orbán. Mr Rooney's part was given to Tamás Major (1910–1986), a tall, gaunt, bald actor, the image of "the Machiavellian villain." He had an irresistible sense of humor and a strong intellect: the essence of the twentieth century Eastern European cunning, in roles such as Richard III, King Lear, Shylock, Volpone, Tartuffe, and Mr Puntila.<sup>14</sup>

Performing Beckett requires of the actor no special effect (Brechtian alienation or other), no extra cock-a-doodling. Of course the anecdotal

<sup>11</sup> Jiří Horčíčka (1927–2007), director at the Czechoslovak Radio.

<sup>12</sup> Lajos Hársing (1925–2000), translator, script editor.

<sup>13</sup> Géza Varga (1921–2004), one of the best directors of radio drama, from 1958 onwards.

<sup>14</sup> The full cast of the first Hungarian *All That Fall* was the following: Mrs. Rooney – Mária Sulyok; Mr Rooney – Tamás Major; Christy – László György; Mr Tyler – Samu Balázs; Mr Slocum – Sándor Pethes; Tommy – László Sinkó; Mr Barrell – István Egri; Miss Fitt – Éva Vas; Jerry – Zoltán Zeitler.



simplification of “soft-loud-slow-fast”<sup>15</sup> does not apply either. The theatre of the absurd at its best means composite writing, from genuine tragedy to slapstick farce; hence it demands of the actor full knowledge and possession of his/her art. Mind you, even such a minute detail as delivering a punch-line properly requires a number of professional qualities. Mrs Rooney’s line, for example, “Minnie, little Minnie!”<sup>16</sup> should have sincere pathos and emotion; her sobs in the scene with Mr Tyler must be real sobs of self-pity. The scene of her getting into Mr Slocum’s car must develop into a full-fledged farce until the climax “I’m in!” This means that a number of professional tricks are required, such as rhythm, pauses, shifts (speedy switches from one mood into another) making appropriate noises of effort, adding just a little bit of eroticism. Mr Rooney should be serious, and not “funny,” in his philosophical tirade about the number of the steps; and his line “It is a thing I carry about with me!” should be filled with violent fury and remorse, though the actor will not (and need not) know what the bloody *thing* is. These are just a few examples of what performing Beckett demands of actors. As actors performing Beckett, Mária Sulyok and Tamás Major were geniuses; but everybody at the mic delivered their parts perfectly. Strange as it may seem, I cannot remember special — memorable — moments of the recording sessions. We were awed by the characters the actors created; I kept looking at my copy of the script and praying to God for them not to make an error (my job was to stop them if they did). This tense atmosphere of creative satisfaction made us forget another order of Gábor’s. To this day I am unable to guess what drove him to such idiocy. Caution? Worry? Need for another *fig-leaf*? He demanded that we should use the “noises” of “the Czech comrades,” and managed — through Foreign Relations — to procure them.

Now, “noises” (I call them that for the time being) are provided by a special member of the staff; then, having been used, they are thrown away as waste, or if good enough, they are taken back to the shelf. Evidently, the Czech team did not bother to look for the original material; knowing (just as well as ourselves) that the order or request was idiotic, they copied the “noises” from the finished recording and sent them to Hungarian Radio Foreign Relations.

Whatever has been recorded on tape loses some of its quality when copied. The Czech colleagues sent us their copied-copied “noises” — too short for fade ins/outs at that — and we copied them to the final tape during editing (“playing together”). I cannot say we were happy with the result.

*All That Fall* was broadcast on 11 January 1968, as Late Night Radio Theatre. *Radio News* of the same week offered my *fig-leaf* lines as propaganda. Deplorable lines, when I read them today.

<sup>15</sup> A veteran actor told Max Reinhardt once (*se non e vero, e ben trovato*), “Do not analyse, Sir, tell us to go soft, loud, slow, fast, and we shall deliver the character.”

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Collected Shorter Plays*, London, Faber and Faber, 1984, 14.

Beckett, now regarded as a classic figure of the controversial trend little known by our audience, the so-called theatre of the absurd, draws a far from idyllic picture of old age in his world-famous radio-play. The cruelty of his realism, the sometimes grotesque portraying of his pathetic characters, the lack of a 'solution' quasi-offer the question for debate: who is at fault, who is responsible, who is deficient in love and humanity, the world, or these egoistic, worrying, piteously fallen old people?<sup>17</sup>

We received one sizeable critical notice (on 20 January, in the journal *Film, Theatre, Music*) by András Barta,<sup>18</sup> who duly acknowledged the outstanding quality of the author and the radio-play, and gave high praises to the actors and the director. However, when trying to rationalize the meaning or message, he got lost in nonsense, defining Mr Rooney as an avaricious, heartless, perverted monster, responsible for psychologically poisoning everybody around him, and young Jerry as the only ray of hope in the sombre world of the play. The broadcast was quite a success among intellectuals. Gábor even organized a listening session for the Dramaturg Section of the Hungarian Theatre Union, followed by my lecture. This had no ambition to *fig-leaf*, provided a good, thorough analysis of the text (I remember giving an etymology of the names, Rue/Rooney, Mad/Maddy, Done/Dunne), with ample quotations from Martin Esslin. The text may or may not have been published — in some dozen copies — by the Hungarian Theatre Institute or in the in-house quarterly of Hungarian Radio and Television.

And that was that? Fortunately not. In the summer of 1969, experiments in prose stereophony were officially started by the Drama and Technical Departments. Varga, János Hámor, our sound-engineer, and myself participated in the project with enthusiasm. Stereophony, now compulsory in prose program recording, means a sound stage between two loudspeakers — in contrast to sound coming out of the one point one speaker of monophony. Ironically named "theatre of the blind" it offers definite (though not limitless) opportunities for more modern writing and directing, or, for that matter, performing the Greek classics that feature depth, differentiation, and parallel plots. Experiments soon became international, thanks to favorable meetings and conferences — and fine recordings of new radio-plays and documentaries.

Quadrophony (a square of four speakers) followed with even more promising results in dramaturgy (parallel, simultaneous monologues, real, dramatically relevant movement of characters). But international sponsors eventually withdrew from funding, in order to invest in multiple surround sound, which — unlike radio art — brought profitable results. However, the

<sup>17</sup> Márton Mesterházi's introduction to *All That Fall* on *Hungarian Radio News*, 11 January 1968.

<sup>18</sup> András Barta (b. 1931) journalist, critic, translator.

experiments meant more than the sound stage between two (or four) speakers. They required discipline in the studio, and carefulness in the technical room: no chance of unwelcome sputters, no chance of slovenly “holes.”

And “noises” became *sound effects*. A “noise” is a nearly superfluous *must*: it slowly fades in, is modestly present, then slowly fades out. A sound effect has meaning: with a sudden, steep fade-in, an intense presence, and a quick fade-out, for example: “Mrs Rooney: Heavens, here comes Connolly’s van! (*She halts. Sound of motor-van. It approaches, passes with thunderous rattles, recedes.*) Are you all right, Mr Tyler? (*Pause.*) Where is he?”<sup>19</sup> Beckett evidently encourages us to use sound effects, not “noises”; I could just as well quote the scene of the “up mail” and the “down train.”

In the early seventies (when Jiří Horčíčka held a modest job in the tape library of Prague Radio), Gábor was removed, to be promoted to a higher executive position. The new Head of Drama, Ottó Lékay, was one of us:<sup>20</sup> he gave permission, even encouragement, for us to get rid of the “noises” in *All That Fall*, and use our own sound effects. Which we did.

And that is the — happy — end of the story.

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<sup>19</sup> Beckett: *Collected Shorter Plays*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Ottó Lékay: The Head of Drama 1971–1985, who was, like us, a script editor, not a party functionary.

# MY WAY WITH THE WORK OF SAMUEL BECKETT

GÁBOR ROMHÁNYI TÖRÖK

*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis (Where you are worth nothing, want nothing)*<sup>1</sup>

*The artist who stakes his being is from nowhere, has no kith.*<sup>2</sup>

*I shall write a book [...] where the phrase is self-consciously smart and slick, but of a smartness and slickness other than that of its neighbours on the page. [...] The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement [...] his experience shall be the menace, the miracle, of an unspeakable trajectory.*<sup>3</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Ever since I read the exquisite Hungarian translation of Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape in 1962 (when I was seventeen), his work has been an intermittent stream of my life. In 1970, with minimum knowledge of English I lexiconized every single word of Malone Dies. In the middle of the seventies I began to learn French and started to lexiconize the Three Novels. It was in those days that I began to correspond with Samuel Beckett. My translation of Mal vu mal dit/ Ill Seen Ill Said was published in 1982 — so began my translator career. In May 1982 I managed to talk with Beckett over the phone in Paris, and he allowed me to translate his Three Novels (He had known me from my letters written to him). The Hungarian Three Novels was published in 1987. I asked Beckett to help me to spend some research time at the Samuel Beckett Archives, in Reading. He was generous enough to support me, so at the end of 1988 I spent two and a half months there. I made notes on Dream of Fair to Middling Women. My translation of it was published in 2001, and my How It Is was out in 2007. At present I am writing an essay on Ill Seen Ill Said. It seems to me that in studying the Beckettian oeuvre I have known the twilight and the silence counterbalanced by the unsurpassable humour of Samuel Beckett.*

<sup>1</sup> Vivian Mercier: *Beckett/Beckett*, Oxford, Oxford University, 1979, 163.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Disjecta*, London, John Calder, 1983, 148.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, London, John Calder, 1993, 138.

I became acquainted with the works of Samuel Beckett in 1962. I was seventeen at the time. I read *Krapp's last Tape* in a periodical, in an unsurpassable Hungarian translation. I had never met a literary work that transmitted so much valuable information in so compact a space. In my eyes it was more valuable than Proust's thousands-of-pages-long *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Later I memorized it and wanted to perform it on the University Stage, but my contemporaries dissuaded me. Once I even went to Dublin, the birthplace of the work, where "at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision at last."<sup>4</sup> At one time I toyed with the idea of attempting a new translation of the play, but the experience of the Hungarian text had been so intense that even from the French and English of the original the Hungarian sentences of the translation came into my mind. I was powerless to suppress their lasting impression, and so abandoned the attempt.

By the middle of the 1960s I had learnt a certain amount of English, and then I came upon *Malone Dies*, the second book in the *Three Novels*. This is the second Beckett text that I read constantly in French, English, German, and Hungarian. Then, I looked up the words in the text, putting the Hungarian meaning above the original French or English words in red, blue, and green ink. (The translation of my own of *Molloy – Malone meurt – L'Innommable* was published in one volume by Magvető, Budapest only in 1987). I would designate the genre of prose poem for the work on account of its unforgettable poetic phrases and sentences:

But the silence was in the heart of the dark, the silence of dust and the things that would never stir, if left alone. And the ticking of the invisible alarm clock was in the voice of that silence which, like the dark, would one day triumph too. And then all would be still and dark and the things at rest forever at last.<sup>5</sup>

Or:

[...] he has come to that stage of his instant when to live is to wander the last of the living in the depths of an instant without bounds, where the light never changes and the wrecks look all alike. Bluer scarcely than white of egg the eyes stare into the space before them, namely the fullness of the great deep and its unchanging calm.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Krapp's Last Tape and Embers*, London, Faber and Faber, 1959, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Three Novels (Molloy – Malone Dies – The Unnamable): Malone Dies*, London, Picador Ed., 1979, 186.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

Sentences like that, says Hugh Kenner,<sup>7</sup> are worthy of Virgil. Especially the end of the book, the love of Moll and Macmann, the scene with Moll, Macmann and Lemuel — in which the word “death” is not heard so much as once, but the writing evokes its constant presence — is peerless as world literature. The rhythm of the sentences — inconstant, nervously clutching and endeavouring to cling on in time, seeking and searching — evokes the concept of waiting, of a death-rattle.

By the seventies I was studying English intensively (Hugh Kenner’s seminal work *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* and that of Lawrence E. Harvey: *Samuel Beckett, Poet and Critic* were of great assistance)<sup>8</sup> and French, for the sake of Flaubert, Deleuze, Barthes, Blanchot, Foucault, and the French reception of Nietzsche. The encounter with the *Three Novels*, however, has become the experience of a lifetime. I looked words up in the French and English versions, though it was a long way from a translation. At this time I was also dealing with other authors. I worked on the translation of the *Three Novels* from 4 October 1984 until 13 July 1985, when it was ready for the printer. In 1979 Samuel Beckett sent me the French *édition de luxe* of the *Trilogie* (Minit, 1971). I devoted a lot of time to reading, checking the words in the text and trying to translate *Textes pour rien*, which consists of thirteen prose-poems springing from the same root as the *Three Novels*, and the asthmatic, death-rattle rhythm of which has much in common with his composition *L’Innommable* (1953) / *The Unnamable* (1958). Deirdre Bair’s 1976 biography (it is almost unheard of for a person’s biography to be published during his lifetime) helped me a lot in finding my bearings and furnished a lot of interesting details about the work and Beckett’s life alike.

My career as a translator began to take an upward turn in 1982, when I succeeded in translating and publishing the prose-poem *Mal vu mal dit*. Even since then this book has been my *livre de chevet*, and in my view one of the most valuable of Beckett’s works, translated at last. I sent a copy to Beckett, who thanked me for it with his characteristic aristocratic courtesy. In May that year I went to Paris for two weeks with the express intention of making contact with him. He left his phone number for me at Minit publishers; and so on 19 May 1982 I rang him up. We talked for about twenty minutes, and even today I can hear how deeply he sighed during the conversation. I spoke in French, but he would begin every sentence in English and then suddenly change to French. It was as if he were thinking in English. I asked for his permission to translate the *Three Novels* into Hungarian. He consented and encouraged me to write to him.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Kenner: *A Reader’s Guide to Samuel Beckett*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1973, 92, 106, 189.

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence E. Harvey: *Samuel Beckett: Poet & Critic*, Princeton, Princeton University, 1970.



In June 1984 I received a contract from a publisher to translate the *Three Novels*. By then both French and English versions had been lexiconized. I began to compose in October and finished in July 1985. That was from the literary perspective the most fulfilling time of my life. I am using the word “compose” deliberately. In this work the musical and poetic qualities of Beckett’s sentences reach their zenith. I would gladly quote at length from these books, but space does not permit. I shall merely remark as follows about the cruellest of all. *The Unnamable* is a revolutionary new style of writing, audible literature. While *Molloy* and especially *Malone Dies* are much more conservative, the latter is full of traditional images and regularly composed sentences of musical worth. The word-avalanche of *The Unnamable* rolls on through relationships formed in words, deprived of time and space, or without cause and effect, through chance events, goals, devices, possibilities, probabilities, conditions, identities, differences, measurements, proportions, mutual influences, events, variations, movements, and processes towards the solitary reward, the final silence, to which it will only be entitled if and when it has, at least in passing, related everything.

The Hungarian *Three Novels* was published over thirty years ago, in May 1987. I did not understand at the time, and I do not to this day, how a novice literary translator like me was given a publisher’s contract for the translation of one of the strangest and most debated books of the twentieth century, and at a time when Budapest was traditionally rich in all sorts of schools and cliques of translators. How could it have come about that after Beckett’s Nobel Prize of 1969 not a single influential “professional” literary translator jumped at this golden opportunity?

I can state without any trace of exaggeration that the publication of the novel meant a breakthrough in my translating career. Good news came from the Parisian publisher Minuit: Beckett was satisfied with the Hungarian *Three Novels*. It was about then that I found out that the Beckett Archive had been operating in Reading, England, since 1971, and that all his literary documents were regularly collected there — published and unpublished, manuscripts and drafts of works already published, so that all these things should be stored there to assist the work of researchers. I wrote to Beckett asking for his support for my proposal to spend a short time in the Reading Archives, as I wanted to study his unpublished works in manuscript form. He replied that he could arrange for my stay of about three months in Reading. Thus, I went over there in October 1988. Professor James Knowlson looked after me personally and ensured that my time there and my work in the Archive were perfectly free of trouble. I made a thorough study of the manuscript of the novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, written in 1932 but then still unpublished. I read it several times, made a lexicon of it, and when it was published posthumously in 1993 I immediately began to translate it. It



appeared in Hungarian in 2001 with the generous support of the copyright holder, Mr Edward Beckett. Gerry Dukes writes of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*:

If you want to enjoy this book, all you need is a knowledge of French, Italian, Spanish and Latin, the services of an expert on Dante, a reliable encyclopaedia, a good Oxford dictionary, the patience of Job and a good sense of humor. What an addition to company they would be! It's uphill all the way, but then so was Calvary, and the view from the top redeems the pain taken.<sup>9</sup>

The novel is an encyclopaedia of Beckett's literary concepts. He certainly made use of it in composing his other novels. I might even call this work emblematic of Beckett's oeuvre, because it contains its past and its future together. It is the peak of early Beckett prose, and we are witnesses of the desperate struggle against the influence of Joyce and Proust, and of the shift towards his later style.

The other manuscript was an 18-page one-act variant of *Fin de partie/Endgame*, entitled *Avant Fin de partie*. This manuscript, however, was no draft but a mature literary work. I translated it into Hungarian. On returning from Reading, at the time a freelance, I was awarded a year's MTA Soros scholarship to continue work in Beckett's oeuvre. For a while publishers and editorial offices opened before me and accepted my translations and articles. It was during this period that my intensive Beckett activity began in earnest. I translated all his post-1970 "dramolettes" for the volume *Beckett Összes Drámái* (Beckett's Collected Dramas), *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, Hugh Kenner's *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians*; I wrote an essay *Beckett and Film*, and also at this time succeeded in publishing his celebrated essays on painting. I gave a lecture on him, entitled "Samuel Beckett, in Paris 1928 to 1930," which was a decisive period of his life, not least because of his connection to Joyce. I translated and published *Mercier and Camier* and *How It Is*. I made his works known on radio, translated John Calder's book *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* for the centenary and published an essay on the *Three Novels* for his ninetieth anniversary.

The year 1996 was a notable one. That was when Professor James Knowlson's biography of Beckett *Damned to Fame* was published; this was authorized, because Knowlson had asked Beckett to approve almost every word. It can only be said that without knowledge of this book authentic research into Beckett cannot be carried out. I would be prepared to translate it at any time.

<sup>9</sup> Gerry Dukes: *How It Is With Bouncing Bel*, *Irish Times*, 31 October 1992, in James Knowlson: *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London, Bloomsbury, 1996, 147.

For the centenary in 2006 I succeeded in having the *Three Novels* republished, this time finely bound, and took it to Reading to show in the week-long celebrations during which numerous world-famous 'Beckettologists' delivered lectures. There I also made the acquaintance of Edward Beckett. In the spring of the year 2001 I spent a month in Dublin at my own expense, to study his correspondence in the archive of Trinity College, the university where Beckett once studied. There too the word "Reading" worked wonders, as when it was spoken the required documents were readily placed at my disposal. After the publication of Knowlson's biography of Beckett it became known that in the mid-1930s he had lived for almost two years in London in order to consult a now famous psychiatrist three times a week. Although no record or document was made of the sessions — or Beckett destroyed it in the meantime — numerous authorities and literary experts consider that the source of several of his later works is to be found in this analysis; indeed, that this explains the cardinal fact that ten years later he seemed consciously to "suppress" his native language and compose his work in French. That is only a work hypothesis, but the question is too complex for us to adopt a unanimous position in answering it. The point is that this incomparable material exists in two forms, French and English. A number of points in his later work give grounds for this slight "error," and this view is justified in the difficult sphere of the analysis of Beckett texts; nevertheless its conclusiveness is open to question.

At the start of this article I mentioned that the alpha of my connection with Beckett's work was *Krapp's Last Tape*. Its omega, however, has been a prose-poem of the elderly author's, *Mal vu mal dit/Ill Seen Ill Said*. The temptation of comparative analysis is strong. Both masterpieces were conceived in the melancholy of farewell and mourning and both were inspired by (the memory of) a great love. The latter is the memory of a beloved and hated woman of whom the writer thought most in her life and after her death, whom in this piece of writing he sees dying, then in death, whom he resurrects, then watches her die again and this time he too dies with her — forever.

Farewell to farewell. Then in that perfect dark foreknell darling sound pip for end begun. First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle. Not another crumb of carrion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness.<sup>10</sup>

For the moment I am planning to write an essay on *Ill Seen Ill Said*. Steven Connor wrote, "For many writers, Samuel Beckett becomes a kind of life

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Beckett: *Ill Seen Ill Said*, London, Calder, 1982, 58.

sentence.<sup>11</sup> I am one of them. This work is like an intermittent stream: now and then it vanishes before your eyes, then suddenly bursts back to the surface with great force. This work has been my sole companion over long years. It has given me strength to live. I have sixteen letters from Samuel Beckett and seven inscribed books. His oeuvre and the memory of his person will go with me to the end of my life.

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## SAMUEL BECKETT'S *PLAY* IN DIGITAL CULTURE: TECHNOLOGIES OF INFLUENCE

NICHOLAS E. JOHNSON, NÉILL O'DWYER, AND ENDA BATES

### ABSTRACT

*This essay discusses recent practice-as-research from Trinity College Dublin's Centre for Beckett Studies, where new media and new theatre technologies are being used to investigate how Samuel Beckett's work is altering, and being altered by, digital culture. The three collaborators who created the 2017 project Intermedial Play, a version of Samuel Beckett's 1963 Play that used a Pan-Tilt-Zoom (PTZ) robotic camera instead of the "interrogator" light of Beckett's script, write here about the directorial, scenographic/videographic, and sonic worlds of this performance, including how it led toward the later Virtual Play (about which more has been published to date). The electronic transmission of this performance, for surveillance by an audience in a different room, raises conceptual questions of simultaneity and "live risk" that are generally absent from digital and film adaptations. The possibility that technology itself can condition and influence performance emerges from this discourse as a key area for further exploration.<sup>1</sup>*

Samuel Beckett's 1963 *Play* clearly responds to the condition of the medium of theatre, but what "theatre" means has continued to change since 1963: how does this cultural shift alter how we work with, or think about, Beckett's own text over time? This chapter explores the 2017 *Intermedial Play/Virtual Play* practice-as-research project at Trinity College Dublin (TCD), which is partly an exploration of how the Beckett text responds to new media within

<sup>1</sup> This publication is a single work of co-equal three-person authorship, arising from the collaboration between the V-SENSE project and the Trinity Centre for Beckett Studies. This publication has emanated from research supported in part by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) under the Grant Number 15/RP/2776, as well as from creative funding from the Trinity Long Room Hub (Interdisciplinary Seed Funding, 2017–18) and the Provost's Fund for the Visual and Performing Arts at Trinity College Dublin. The authors acknowledge the collaboration of Rafael Pagés, Jan Ondřej, Konstantinos Ampliantitis, David Monaghan, Aljosa Smolic, Maeve O'Mahony, Colm Gleeson, Caitlin Scott, John Belling, and Colm Mc Nally. The researchers are grateful for the support of Edward Beckett and the Estate of Samuel Beckett.

digital culture. It is the first in-depth exploration of process and product of Experiment One (14 April 2017), also known as *Intermedial Play*, a version of *Play* that emerged from conversations relating to creative possibilities for a PTZ (Pan-Tilt-Zoom) robotic teleconferencing camera and control unit. Conceptually exploring the similarity between such a camera (designed for surveillance applications) and the “interrogator” light of Beckett’s script, this experiment was staged with live actors performing in one room but streamed via a web link to an audience sitting in a different building, raising questions of simultaneity and “live risk” that are generally absent from digital and film adaptations of *Play*. The second experiment, relating to a user-centered FVV (Free-Viewpoint-Video, a variety of VR or Virtual Reality) version called *Virtual Play*, raises other questions about the new cultural subjectivities imposed on humans by new technologies of presence.<sup>2</sup>

Authored by the three collaborators who developed the *Intermedial Play/Virtual Play* project at a conceptual level — working as director (Nicholas Johnson), videographer/scenographer (Néill O’Dwyer), and sound artist (Enda Bates) — this essay will discuss the strands of influence in each of our areas of responsibility in the project, with special attention to the dynamic tension between “tradition” and “innovation” in Beckettian performance. In addition to outside influences that were brought into the rehearsal room, this project drew from our research into prior production histories as well as film adaptations (both Marin Karmitz’s 1966 *Comédie* and Anthony Minghella’s 2001 *Beckett on Film* adaptation). Placing these past versions of *Play* in dialogue with our 2017 experiments will help elicit the specificities of new, real-time, digital telepresence technologies, which we feel offer a fresh digital augmentation of a pivotal script within Beckett’s oeuvre, as well as a Beckettian response to the technologies themselves.

#### DIRECTORIAL INFLUENCES

A central ontological challenge of the live theatre is that while the “blueprint” of a source text might remain mostly the same over time, the conditions of its production and reception continuously change. This shift could be considered as a problem of influence, occurring on multiple levels. First, the circumstances that apply to a given context — social, technological, material — affect what types of production are conceivable, permissible, or otherwise possible at a given time and place for the artists involved. Second, these

<sup>2</sup> As detailed analyses of the *Virtual Play* project have been published elsewhere, this publication will not engage substantially with it; see Néill O’Dwyer – Nicholas Johnson: Exploring Volumetric Video and Narrative through Samuel Beckett’s *Play*, *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2019). DOI: 14794713.2019.1567243.

underlying contexts also change how people receive the work; audiences may not be aware of the first layer of influence, tending to read what is seen on stage as meaningful choices, attributing agency to the artists rather than to the surrounding context. The chain of events that thus arises, in the case of the long-term reception of a work by a canonical author like Samuel Beckett, forms a third influence, which we might call "tradition." However exigent or localized the original circumstances of production were, performance histories (and sometimes performance contracts) exert weight on the present. When contemporary artists seek to stage a canonical work, especially one that is still in copyright, there is always a risk that such traditions, with the ongoing pressures on artists and audiences from the changing culture around them, can tend to calcify into what is sometimes called "museum theatre." Such risk generally increases as an artist grows in stature.

One of the strongest constraints on what is possible in performance is technological. Theatres are not only architectural configurations that make space visible and flexible in specific ways; they are also semi-industrial spaces that generally contain engineered equipment for quickly altering the spatial, sonic, and visual environment. The practices of twentieth-century aesthetic modernism that fed into Beckett's theatrical vocabulary are heavily indebted to the existence of electric light and recorded sound, for example, but these were so normalized by the end of the century that their historic specificity is easily forgotten. As new media expanded in Beckett's time, he tended to adopt and explore them in his writing, so much so that one can say that these media *influenced* Beckett's writing; new technologies were "affordances" that at least informed, if not generated, script concepts. Though *Play* is the clearest example of a Beckett play that is inconceivable without the influence of theatrical lighting, it was not the first time that this technology had appeared in a key role. In their early Beckett criticism, James Knowlson and John Pilling identified the trend:

Earlier in Beckett's theatre, light had been a more or less constant factor, grey in *Endgame*, 'blazing' in *Happy Days*, and used spatially in *Krapp's Last Tape* to create a zone of light separate from the darkness. But *Play* reveals the dramatic effectiveness of a rigorously and rhythmically controlled interplay of light and darkness, produced in this case by the spotlight switching rapidly from one head to another and so governing the dramatic tempo of the play.<sup>3</sup>

The question of how this light would operate, and how it would change dramaturgically through the course of *Play* (especially in the *da capo* section

<sup>3</sup> James Knowlson – John Pilling: *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett*, London, John Calder, 1979, 111.



of the repetition) altered with each production that Beckett was involved in during the 1960s, based on available technologies as well as local ingenuity of directors, designers, and technicians. The technological limitations of how to automate the light and help it to serve its dramaturgical function, especially whether to use three lights as opposed to one and whether to use manual or remote control, were regularly discussed in correspondence that Beckett had about the German, American, French, and British premieres. Even a small sample of these shows the pressure exerted by the technology itself, and Beckett's willingness to adapt and develop his ideas in relation to these conditions. Writing to Christian Ludvigsen on 22 September 1963, Beckett noted that the "probing quality, like an accusing finger" would be best "obtained by a single pivoting spot and not, as in Ulm, by three fixed independent spots, one for each face, switching on and off as required."<sup>4</sup> In the same letter, he imagines that "This mobile spot should be set mechanically once and for all so as to strike full on its successive targets without fumbling and move from one to another at maximum speed," and allows that it could be done by "electric control from wings or manually from a kind of prompter's box below footlights," provided the operator is "invisible."<sup>5</sup> These directions would have been very difficult to execute at the time, given that "intelligent" lighting and digital control protocols for theatre illumination were not available until 1986.<sup>6</sup> Achieving such precision with analogue control or manual operation and with a single light source, not to mention the added challenge of the "chorus" sections where all three urns actually do have to be illuminated together (meaning that the size of a single beam would have to change at that moment), would prove unsurprisingly to be a point of great contention in the performance history. Writing to Alan Schneider on 26 November 1963 ahead of the New York premiere, Beckett reports his wife's reaction to Deryk Mendel's second production (in Berlin), referring to the light as a problem:

Deryk said he had got his spot pivoting and moving fast. Suzanne did not feel much speed and said there was little visible beam. There should be a pencil (finger) of light snapping from face to face. But we have been through all this. Deryk worked out some system which I don't understand and can't explain. The man on the light should be regarded as a fourth player and must know the text inside and out.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Beckett: *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1957–1965*, Vol. 3, George Craig – Martha Dow Fehsenfeld – Dan Gunn – Lois More Overbeck (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University, 2014, 574. Emphasis in original.

<sup>5</sup> Beckett: *Letters*, Vol. 3, 574. Emphasis in original.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Cadena: *Automated Lighting: The Art and Science of Moving Light in Theatre, Live Performance, and Entertainment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Burlington, Focal, 2013, 25–31.

<sup>7</sup> Beckett: *The Letters*, Vol. 3, 584.

In Beckett's letter to George Devine of 9 March 1964, he writes in a postscript: "Perhaps some form of manual control after all," referring most likely to a line within the letter when he writes of the variations he was considering within the *da capo*, "The whole idea involves a spot mechanism of greater flexibility than has seemed necessary so far."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the concept of the play required a mechanism of greater flexibility than had been invented yet.

A first opportunity to experiment with Beckett's *Play* in theatrical performance arose as part of the *Ethica* project (2012–2013), a collection of four Beckett shorts that began in Dublin and toured to Bulgaria and Northern Ireland.<sup>9</sup> Considerations about the role of the light as interrogator began early on in that process, with a key aim of both rehearsal methods and technical design being to make sure that actors responded directly to the light as a key stimulus (and not to a textual cue of their next line), enacting the fundamental system that is the essence of the play. The rehearsal technique used to achieve this was that actors memorised their texts independently as a continuous monologue, rather than individual alternating lines. In rehearsal, the director would use a flashlight or other instrument to provoke speech; the actor was not given agency over their own text in rehearsal. Finally, the sequence remained unpredictable for the actor for as long as possible, never rehearsing Beckett's actual order until a late stage of the process. Technologically, the interrogator was given a physical (mechanical) form on stage as a single visible movable light, programmed digitally to sweep in search of the heads, pass over them to invoke the chorus, and then finally pinpoint an individual head to start the stories.<sup>10</sup>

*Intermedial Play* intentionally used none of the same actors who had performed the roles in the 2012–2013 production, but we did adopt the same rehearsal method, asking actors to learn monologues — in one case working remotely on the text via online video — and only rehearsing together at the last possible stage. For the actors, in spite of the technological mediation of the project, this did not function any differently than it would have for theatrical preparation. The greatest technical challenge to overcome directorially was that when performing for a camera rather than a light, the actor has no "goad" or prompt to let them know that they are being observed. Before even asking the question of what the audience viewing the piece might see on their screen, it was necessary to confirm that the actors could be made aware, during the performance, that they were "active." In that sense a camera cannot simply

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 595.

<sup>9</sup> The project, funded by Trinity College Dublin and produced in collaboration with Sugarglass Theatre, included *Play*, *Come and Go*, *Catastrophe*, and *What Where*. With the overall production co-directed by Nicholas Johnson and Marc Atkinson, Johnson was responsible for *Play* and *Catastrophe*, while Atkinson rehearsed and staged *Come and Go* and *What Where*. Atkinson designed lights for the overall production, while Johnson designed sound.

<sup>10</sup> The name of the device in question was the MAC250, linked via a DMX cable to an Ion lighting desk.

replace the light as the interrogator; it must somehow integrate with it. A variety of solutions were considered, including lighting the interior of the urns with light-emitting diodes (LED) and programming these to trigger at the same moment as the camera; we even assessed the camera housing itself to see if it could allow for an attached light without affecting its mechanism. In the end, because of its functionality and ease, a classically analogue solution was found: the operator would be the interface between separate camera controls and light controls, hitting two buttons at the same time on the two different controllers.

### VIDEOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES

The origins of the *Intermedial Play* project extend back to 2015, when Néill O'Dwyer (then a doctoral student in the Department of Drama at TCD) was approached by the head of department to conceive and exhibit a project that would employ the specificities of recently installed hardware, namely a robotic PTZ camera. This technology was initially developed for video surveillance, because it affords the remote camera operator a hemispherical field of vision through its built-in pan, tilt, and zoom functionality. As such, it operates primarily with a live camera feed; although recording is an option, the power in its functionality is through its harnessing of the live video stream. In recent years the technology has been widely deployed in the more benign context of video teleconferencing; it is particularly useful in roundtable seminar formats, where any given *present* attendee can communicate directly with a set of *telepresent* interlocutors. The objectives of the brief were to use the technology to demonstrate the new digital video possibilities available in the department, and to offer an inspirational reference point to students and staff; it is therefore notable that this was a case where the technology was more influential than the source, which was open to choice. O'Dwyer had seen Johnson's production of *Ethica* at the Samuel Beckett Theatre in 2012, as well as engaging that same year with Jonathan Heron's performance workshop within the Beckett Summer School, which included workshops with *Play* (including consideration of Minghella's 2001 adaptation). The capabilities of the PTZ camera were immediately suggestive of the moving-head light from *Ethica*, meaning that the technological resonance between these devices, neither of which was available to Beckett, nonetheless invoked a Beckettian text as the most productive to investigate.

Bringing a playtext across media into the digital realm is a complex and potentially costly transaction, but through the open-ended subjectivity of digital artefacts, new epistemic possibilities and new forms of knowledge are encountered. Digital media and other state-of-the-art tools afford the

ongoing experimental practices of artists, permitting creation of innovative content as well as new forms, while perhaps “resurrecting” old content into digital art. In this context, “digital art” is understood as experimental practice that endeavours to elicit the unique specificities of digital technologies; it is not simply a catch-all phrase to describe or categorise artworks that employ digital technologies to do that same work that was already possible using analogue formats, yet more efficiently. As such, it was the goal of the *Intermedial Play* project to foreground the unique specificities of the digital PTZ technology, for two reasons. First, there was the hope that the gesture would encourage the audience to reflect on their contemporary (digital) status in its sociopolitical and historical-material totality (especially the aspects of surveillance, repetition, presentation of self, presence/liveness, and the screen). Second, this practice of engaging with the technologies of performance as such, and deeply considering how they operate on the performing subject is a specifically Beckettian strategy, familiar from his works such as *All That Fall*, *Film*, and *Ghost Trio*.

One of the technological specificities of the PTZ camera is that on seeing it for the first time, the audience can experience something of a sublime shock or surprise when the camera pans, pivots, or zooms with superhuman speed and accuracy. Audiences accustomed to handheld cameras, smooth Hollywood-style Steadicam, or the choppy snap cuts of advertising are taken aback by a distinctive machine-like point-of-view. This break with dominant film techniques represents a rift in tradition and knowledge, opening a new horizon afforded by the technology in which the human is repositioned. The more traditional techniques can be linked to the gestural functions of the camera operator's body more easily, meaning that the viewer experiences a kind of embodied choreography of the image identified with the eye looking into the camera, whereas the “surgical” speed and precision of the PTZ intensifies the viewer's identification with the camera itself. This shift accelerates a distancing from nature and a growing dehumanisation arising from the condition that “our biological, ontogenetic and sentient selves become increasingly dissipated against the horizon of advances in the technical [...] milieu.”<sup>11</sup>

By directing that the actors take their cue from the interrogating spotlight, Beckett's stage directions expose and highlight the internal workings of the theatre. He also sets up a game of interaction between the spotlight operator and the actors, where the audience inhabits the role of witnesses to a sort of Pavlovian trial. However, in the theatrical version, the audience retains its position as indisputably separated from the process, a cold and detached jury.

<sup>11</sup> Néill O'Dwyer: *Death and Ecstasy: Reflections on a Technological Sublime*, *Proceedings of the European Society of Aesthetics* 8 (2016), 375.

The result of using the camera was to bring the audience closer to the action, taking them inside the interrogation process. By using a programmable digital control desk — which unfortunately only had a maximum number of four pre-sets per video channel — we were able to assign one close-up shot to each actor and a fourth master shot that would take in the three actors in a single frame.<sup>12</sup> The optical zoom length was also very impressive for such a condensed piece of technology; despite the large distance from the actor to the camera, we were easily able to achieve extreme close-ups with a crystal-clear image, as well as the wide-angle master shot. Even though the audience members would not have control over the robotic camera, they could more easily align themselves with the “interrogator” by watching the live video feed. It should be noted that we did not use editing processes or multiple cameras in *Intermedial Play*; we just used the single camera, with a continuous stream. Editing was achieved perceptually through the pans and zooms of the camera. The pressures of performance for both actors and technicians were almost exactly like those in the theatre, but with added complexity due to technological layers and distance from the unseen audience. This produced an interesting counterpoint to established film strategies, which rely heavily on montage to supplant the fiction to a different spatio-temporal context. This is what Walter Benjamin theorized as “desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.”<sup>13</sup> Benjamin was astonished, early in the life of screen technologies, by the ease with which audiences could forgo reality and slip into the meta-reality introduced by the filmic assemblage. However, the result of using a continuous video feed was that it was the audience who experienced the supplanting — not the camera or object. That is to say, it was not the object that was brought closer to the audience, but rather the audience who were brought into the object. This experience of telepresence is also more typical of live video feeds in digital culture.

Besides the influence of the PTZ technology on videography and audience perception in *Intermedial Play*, there were also new dissemination and broadcasting possibilities afforded by digital networks, where even remote and non-centralized nodes have the capability to broadcast a video signal (i.e. a cultural symbol). The harnessing of this specificity was central to the conceptual and dramaturgical development of the work. Apart from substituting the spotlight with the PTZ video camera, there was also the

<sup>12</sup> It would have been possible to rent a desk with a capacity for more pre-sets, but we wanted to work to the constraints of the equipment in the school rehearsal studio. The camera itself has the capacity to receive up to 128 pre-set commands.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in H. Arendt (ed.) and H. Zohn (trans.): *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken, [1955] 2007, 223.



question of where the audience would be, and under what exact conditions they would perceive the content. We agreed from the outset that there would be an intention to harness the live-streaming capabilities of the technical setup by broadcasting to a remote site.<sup>14</sup> We investigated several software options for streaming video content, and Telestream's "Wirecast Play for YouTube" proved to be the most robust, affordable and compatible with the camera hardware. Wirecast Play is a piece of software that is especially designed to be compatible with the YouTube's live-streaming service. In spite of the ethical challenges inherent in engaging with one of the "big five" data firms, YouTube does provide a service that allows amateurs, non-professionals, and small enterprises to broadcast cultural content without having to pay substantial broadcast license overheads, which is an improvement on the top-down broadcasting model that dominated the twentieth century.

In a live production where the audience is anchored to a single perspective, part of the fascination of *Play* is the observation of a live actor "running the race" under "real" conditions, where the observer can feel the actors' risk in having to respond accurately to hundreds of prompts over a period of ten minutes, and then repeat the performance. Screened versions of the play do not occasion the same sensation, since visible editing — used abstractly to some extent in Marin Karmitz's 1966 *Comédie*, but much more visibly and extensively in Minghella's more recent version — implies that the actor is not achieving their performance in one take, but rather that a director is assembling the material asynchronously. The ontology of film thus disrupts the dramaturgy — unsurprisingly, given the play's strong link to the theatre — not only because of this added layer of authority above even the interrogator, but also because it deprives the actors of their purgatorial logic by implying rest. We were excited by the possibility that a PTZ live-stream could engage the impact of the screen without this dramaturgical trade-off, showing the audience a single, continuous take, ostensibly performed by live actors in a nearby room for their benefit.

This gesture implies an ethical progression for the audience, from the theatrical/filmic situation of "witnessing" interrogation to actually becoming the interrogator. The editing choices reflected this journey by the viewer, and we took the offer made by Beckett to allow for an element of variation in the *da capo* by showing this progression, in the following schema:

Block A (before chorus, first time): wide shot locked off, manual interrogator light  
 Block B (after chorus, first time): pan and zoom, "signal" lights to show camera focus

<sup>14</sup> The remote venue for the audience was the Arts Technology Research Laboratory, about a ten-minute walk from the Samuel Beckett Centre dance studio where the PTZ camera, actors, and technicians were set up. The latency in the digital network between the two spaces was about ten seconds.

Block C (before chorus, *da capo*): wide pan, “signal” lights to show camera focus, sound

Block D (after chorus, *da capo*): pan and zoom, “signal” lights to show camera focus, sound

The videography in “Block A” acknowledged the historical influence of works like Marin Karmitz’s *Comédie* or the film versions of *Was Wo/What Where* (1985/2013) and the fact that the audience would be looking at a large screen, by enacting first the standard screened vocabulary of an exterior witness watching faces light up on a field of blackness. From the first time the speakers address the interrogator directly after the middle chorus, the technology of the PTZ was activated and exploited, to become progressively more present for the audience. A key tool for effecting this transition from an analogue vocabulary to a digital one was the use of sound design.

#### SONIC INFLUENCES

The sound design for *Intermedial Play* was directly influenced by Anthony Minghella’s 2001 *Beckett on Film* adaptation, most specifically in the use of sound to portray the physicality of the camera that served as the “interrogator” of Beckett’s script, in place of the light in the original theatrical productions. However, the role of the camera (and its associated audibility) is fundamentally different in this live-streamed production, when compared to the highly cinematic interpretation of the play by Minghella. In many ways, the role and the nature of the interrogator represent the fundamental research question investigated by the *Intermedial Play* project, and this is equally true of the approach to the sound design.

In traditional theatrical productions of *Play*, the presence of the interrogator is physically embodied by the movement of the spotlight from one actor to another. In Minghella’s film adaptation, the interrogator is instead embodied by a camera, using both standard cinematic techniques of cuts and editing as well as intermittent camera sounds. These camera sounds are frequently used in medium shots when camera focus changes are used to shift between actors, but they are also present when the camera zooms in or out on a single actor. In general, however, changes between actors are achieved using a straight cut, without any associated sound design. Our experiment investigated an approach which falls somewhere between the original theatrical design and the more cinematic language adopted by Minghella. Like the *Beckett on Film* adaptation, *Intermedial Play* involves the mediation of camera technology, but the form of a single PTZ (Pan-Tilt-Zoom) robotic teleconferencing camera and the live performance and streaming of the play precludes the



use of cinematic language in the form of cuts, editing, multiple cameras, and offline sound design. Instead, the physical movement of the PTZ camera re-contextualizes the interrogator within the context of new digital technologies and communication mediums, meaning that the sound world had to articulate a progression whereby the audience is seduced from the analogue into the digital. Thus, Blocks A and B had no associated sound design, using lighting and PTZ changes alone; in the *da capo*, when the audience (it was presumed) would have begun to settle into the new cinematic vocabulary, sound design was used to accentuate the physicality and presence of the PTZ camera as interrogator. Finally, at the conclusion of the piece, all visible elements were removed, with only the sound of the camera heard in isolation, suggesting the continuing hunting of the interrogator within the vacant darkness of the visible scene. This is a further reference back to the *Ethica* production, in which the "interrogator" light was active both during the pre-set and post-set configurations, suggesting both that the audience might yet have their own turn inside the urn, and that "the inquirer (light) begins to emerge as no less a victim of his inquiry than they and as needing to be free, within narrow limits, literally to act the part, i.e. to vary if only slightly his speeds and intensities."<sup>15</sup>

In *Intermedial Play*, the physical embodiment of the PTZ camera as interrogator using sound was achieved in a direct manner, without the use of pre-composed material. This was implemented using a contact microphone mounted on the PTZ unit which picked up the electromechanical sounds of the PTZ motors as the camera shifted from one pre-defined position to the next. This sound was then mixed with the actor's dialogue, captured using three microphones mounted in each urn, and broadcast live alongside the video feed. The audio signal picked up directly from the PTZ unit via the contact microphone naturally matched the profile and gesture of the physical camera movements in a very real sense. However, when considered from the perspective of the audience, the high-frequency timbre of the small, electromechanical motors of the PTZ unit suggested an almost synthetic, electronic sound world, rather than the assumed weightiness of a physically moving camera. Drawing on techniques from electroacoustic composition, some live processing of the contact microphone signal was therefore introduced to achieve the desired timbre, while retaining the overall sonic shape and gesture of the PTZ motors. This was achieved by the real-time pitch-shifting of the contact microphone signal downward by two octaves, thereby suggesting a more plausible weightiness and less synthetic timbre. In addition, and for similar reasons, the pitch-shifted signal was also routed

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Beckett to George Devine, 9 March 1964, *The Letters*, Vol. 3, 595.

through a digital model of an electric guitar amplifier, as the sonic effect of the virtual loudspeaker cabinet again suggested a more significant physical weight to the sonic gesture, compared to the original timbre.

In the final production, this real-time approach to the sound design successfully retained the liveness of the performance, while also embodying the physicality of the camera's role as interrogator. As such, *Intermedial Play* demonstrates the usage of new digital technologies to augment and re-interpret Beckett's work in a new context, different from traditional theatre yet also different from the more abstracted cinematic adaptation of Minghella.

### CONCLUSION

It is now almost a truism of writing about Beckett and technology that he always considers the ontology of his medium. Because *Play* appeared in Beckett's lifetime in so many different media — not only different productions, but also in versions for print, recordings, cinema, radio, and television — it is an excellent source material for investigating how specific technologies exert influence on a work, as well as discovering how these configurations alter the experience of subjectivity for performers and audiences. It is logical that the media that continue to develop after his lifetime would generate new possibilities, affordances, and constraints, and this project implies that certain values apply when undertaking such translations. We observed Beckett's own admonition to Alan Schneider ahead of the American premiere, which seemed to acknowledge that the play lives not in technological specificities as much as it does in ideas: "What matters is that you feel the spirit of the thing and the intention as you do. Give them that as best you can, even if it involves certain deviations from what I have written and said."<sup>16</sup>

The spirit of practice-as-research (PaR) within universities, especially in robust interdisciplinary research configurations like the Samuel Beckett Laboratory, enables a freedom with experimentation that the commercial theatre cannot easily mimic. What initially began as a single PaR project, conceived mostly as a demonstration of a technology in which Beckett's presence was incidental, has now evolved into an entire multi-year research strand linking creative arts practice with creative technologies, encompassing *Intermedial Play* as well as the later *Virtual Play* (which used the same performers). In 2018 and 2019 this work progressed further into *Augmented Play*, which integrates volumetric video content into a location-based spectacle

<sup>16</sup> Beckett to Alan Schneider, 26 November 1963, *The Letters*, Vol. 3, 585.

where the content can be viewed using a smart phone, tablet or augmented reality (AR) headset.<sup>17</sup> The crucial first experiment now has its own archive of influences: flowing from Beckett's stream, but also widening it.

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<sup>17</sup> This version launched in September 2019 in a partnership with Volograms, a Dublin-based spin-out from the V-SENSE research group that works in volumetric video.



## CONTRIBUTORS

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Patrick Armstrong is a PhD candidate in English (Modern and Contemporary Literature) at the University of Cambridge, where he is completing a dissertation on the relation between technologies of vision (especially microscopes) and literary modernism. His essay “Instrumental Optics: Microscopic and Telescopic Lenses in Thomas Hardy’s *Two on a Tower*” was published in the Winter edition of the *Thomas Hardy Journal* in 2017.

Enda Bates is an Assistant Professor of Music Technology and deputy director of the Music & Media Technology programme at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. His research work includes spatial music composition and performance, spatial audio, the aesthetics of electro-acoustic music, and the augmented electric guitar. His work has been performed by, among others, the Crash Ensemble, RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra, Paul Hillier/Chamber Choir Ireland, Anne La Berge, the Doelen Quartet, Trio Scordatura, Ensemble Mise-en, Concorde, Darragh Morgan, and New Dublin Voices. See [www.endabates.net](http://www.endabates.net) for full credits.

Linda Ben-Zvi is Professor Emerita, Colorado State and Tel Aviv Universities; John Stern Distinguished Professor, Colorado; Lady Davis Professor, Hebrew University; twice president of the International Beckett Society; founder and for fourteen years convener of the Beckett Working Group, International Federation of Theatre Research; and chair of the Annual Beckett Lecture, Tel Aviv University. She has authored and edited thirteen books, including four on Samuel Beckett — *Samuel Beckett*, *Women in Beckett*, *Drawing on Beckett*, *Beckett at 100*, with Angela Moorjani — and four on Susan Glaspell. Her Glaspell biography was recipient of the Jury Prize of the American Theatre Library Association.

Jonathan Bignell is Professor of Television and Film at the University of Reading. His writing on Beckett includes the book *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays* and articles in *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* and the *Journal of Beckett Studies*. Jonathan has published chapters on Beckett in the collections *Writing and Cinema* (which he also edited), *Beckett and Nothing* (ed. Daniela Caselli), and *Drawing on Beckett* (ed. Linda Ben-Zvi). He

is currently working on a collaborative project documenting and analysing Harold Pinter's radio, stage, and screen drama. Jonathan is a Trustee of the Beckett International Foundation at the University of Reading.

Llewellyn Brown teaches French literature at the Lycée international de Saint-Germain-en-Laye. He has published *Figures du mensonge littéraire: études sur l'écriture au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle* (2005), *L'Esthétique du pli dans l'œuvre de Henri Michaux* (2007), *Beckett, les fictions brèves: voir et dire* (2008), *Savoir de l'amour* (2012), *Beckett, Lacan and the Voice* (2016). He is a member of the editorial board of publisher Lettres modernes Minard, for whom he directs the "Samuel Beckett" series.

Néill O'Dwyer is a Senior Postdoctoral Research Fellow based in the V-SENSE project, in the Department of Computer Science at Trinity College Dublin (TCD). He is an adjunct lecturer and research fellow of the School of Creative Arts, where he teaches Performance and Technology. He is an awardee of the prestigious Irish Research Council (IRC) Government of Ireland Research Fellowship (2017–2019). He specializes in practice-based research in the fields of scenography and design-led performance with a specific focus on digital media, computer vision, human–computer interaction, prosthesis, symbiosis, agency, performativity, and the impact of technology on artistic processes.

Mariko Hori Tanaka is Professor of English at Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo, Japan. She has published essays on the reception of Beckett's works in Japan and the influence of Haiku on Beckett in *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, and chapters in collections of essays on Beckett. With Yoshiki Tajiri and Michiko Tsushima, she edited *Samuel Beckett and Pain* (Rodopi, 2013) and *Samuel Beckett and trauma* (Manchester University Press, 2018). In Japanese, she authored *Beckett Junrei [Pilgrimage]* in 2007 and *Kaitai o Kasaneru Godot o Machinagara: Enshutsuka to shite no Beckett [Revised Versions of Waiting for Godot: Beckett as a Director]* in 2017, which received the Yoshida Hidekazu Award in 2018.

Nicholas E. Johnson is Associate Professor of Drama at Trinity College Dublin. Books include *Experimental Beckett* (Cambridge UP, 2020) and *Bertolt Brecht's David Fragments* (Bloomsbury, 2020). With Jonathan Heron, he co-edited the *Journal of Beckett Studies* special issues on pedagogy (Vol. 29, No. 1, 2020) and performance (Vol. 23, Nr. 1, 2014) and founded the Samuel Beckett Laboratory in 2013. He is a founding co-director of the Trinity Centre for Beckett Studies and co-convened the Beckett Working Group for IFTR, 2014–2018. He works as a dramaturg for Pan Pan and Dead Centre and has held visiting research positions at Freie Universität Berlin and Yale University.

Márton Mesterházi took his MA at the Budapest Arts Faculty in 1964 (Hungarian, English and French). The same year he was offered the job of script editor at the Drama Department of Hungarian Radio, where he worked until his retirement in 2003. He was responsible for radio and stage plays written in English, French, Latin, Greek, and the languages of the former Yugoslavia. His publications include *The World of Sean O'Casey* (monograph, 1984) and *Ír ember színpadon* [Irish Man on Stage, 2006]. He took his PhD in 1987 with a thesis on the Hungarian reception of the same author, published in 1993 (*Sean O'Casey in Hungary*).

Laurens De Vos is Assistant Professor in Theatre Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He obtained his PhD in 2006 from the University of Ghent. He is the author of *Cruelty and Desire in the Modern Theater: Antonin Artaud, Sarah Kane, and Samuel Beckett* (Dickinson Fairleigh UP, 2011) and *Shakespeare* (Lannoo, 2016) and editor of *Sarah Kane in Context* (Manchester UP, 2010) and *Beckett's Voices/Voicing Beckett* (Brill, 2021). He has published articles on English contemporary playwrights such as Harold Pinter, Mark Ravenhill, and David Greig, and on theatre makers such as Jan Fabre, Ivo van Hove, and Milo Rau. To his research topics belong the dynamics of the gaze in theatre and arts. He is a member of the Executive Committee of the European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance (EASTAP).

Anita Rákóczy is a Lecturer at Károli Gáspár University of The Reformed Church in Hungary. As a dramaturg and theatre critic, she has reviewed several international theatre festivals. She has conducted research on Samuel Beckett's *Fin de partie* at CUNY Graduate Centre New York as a Fulbright Scholar, and also in the University of Reading's Samuel Beckett Collection. She has worked for the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute and the International Theatre Institute (ITI) Hungarian Centre. She has published in *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* and the *Journal of Beckett Studies*. She was co-organizer of the 2017 Budapest IFTR Samuel Beckett Working Group Meeting.

Teresa Rosell Nicolás is Assistant Professor of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature at the University of Barcelona. Her lines of research center on hermeneutics, dramatic theory and aesthetic representation in the post-war period, and she is Principal Investigator on the project Comparative Literature in the European Intellectual Space. She has published widely on these topics and on authors like Samuel Beckett, Claude Simon, Herta Müller, and Jorge Semprún. She has co-edited *Joan Fuster: Figura de temps* (2012) and *Comparatistes sense Comparatisme* (2018, with Antoni Martí Monterde).



Yoshiko Takebe is Associate Professor in the Translation and Interpreting Course in the Department of Practical English, Shujitsu University, Japan. Her research focuses on the correlation between non-verbal and verbal forms of expression with respect to drama and theatre. She was born in New York and studied Drama and Theatre in Research at Royal Holloway College, University of London. Her recent paper "Translating the Physicality of Western Texts into Japanese Theatre" is published in *The Body in Translation, the Body and Translation* (Lambert-Lucas Publishing, 2018).

Gábor Romhányi Török graduated in cultural history and library science in 1968. He has translated the works of Samuel Beckett, Michel Foucault, Friedrich Nietzsche, Gustave Flaubert, Hugh Kenner, and Michel Onfray. His most important translations of Samuel Beckett's oeuvre are: *Mal vu mal dit / Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982), the *Three Novels (Molloy – Malone meurt – L'Innommable, 1987, 2006)*, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (2001), and *How It Is* (2007). In 1988 he received Samuel Beckett's grant and spent three months in Reading. He retired in 2007 and has continued literary activity ever since. His awards include: Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (2002), Hungarian Knight's Cross (2014).

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L'Harmattan France  
5-7 rue de l'Ecole Polytechnique  
75005 Paris  
T.: 33.1.40.46.79.20  
Email: diffusion.harmattan@wanadoo.fr

L'Harmattan Italia SRL  
Via Degli Artisti 15  
10124 TORINO  
Tél: (39) 011 817 13 88 / (39) 348 39 89 198  
Email: harmattan.italia@agora.it

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