

**Michael J. Sidnell**

## **Beckett's Sacrifice of Archaic Theatre on the Altar of Modernism**

Beckett's career as a dramatist was founded on the discovery that the theatrical medium could break down artistic *impasses* that he had confronted in the writing of fiction and had perceived in painting and other arts. His theatrical explorations would prove radically transformative but Beckett did not approach the theatre with a view to renovating it. That ambition developed after he had discovered theatre's fecund materiality, its multivocal actuality and the fisionability that black marks on a page, however inventively set down, cannot match. In theatre he found not only relief but means of extending the reach of human expression in ways that he had not, in his fiction, even conceived of doing.

If it is rather unusual to find theatre in the vanguard of the arts — as painting, by contrast, has so often seemed to be — the reasons for its conservatism may be found in its communality, its immediacy and especially in its historic, humanistic and pre-technological (Benjamin, 1996, p. 260) attachment to the living human body. But unlike most theatre artists Beckett was prepared — perhaps eager would be the right word, considering his professed aims of deconstructing writing and language (Beckett, 1984a, p. 51-54) — to sacrifice even the most fundamental, indispensable and precious elements of theatre; and to do so ever more rigorously as he developed from playwright to director and *auteur*.

The discussion that follows is divided into 4 parts. The first introduces Beckett's confrontation, early in his career, with artistic obstacles of the kind just alluded to. The remaining three parts concern some of the devices and practices by means of which Beckett visited upon the theatre a radically modernist poetics. The first of these is a set of devices that I call “emanations”, by which I mean interventions from

off-stage, which remotely but obviously control, limit or comment on what happens on the stage. The second part refers to estrangements of language but these are so extensive and various that I focus on just one — bilinguality — and touch lightly on a couple of others. The third part has to do with the cruelest set of devices in Beckett's theatre: the immobilisation, the encapsulation and the fragmentation of the human figure on the stage. Of course, this division into three sets is only an expository scaffolding adopted for the sake of clarity: frequently and finally the integration of such devices in Beckett's work insists on being recognized.

### Introduction

Some of the artistic obstacles that confronted Beckett as he turned to theatre are all too apparent in his first complete play, *Eleuthéria* (meaning “state of freedom”) written in French in 1947. Beckett was eager for a production and Jean Vilar and Roger Blin showed some interest in the script but the play was never staged (Knowlton, 1996, p. 365-366). Later, Beckett firmly rejected it and the full text remained unpublished in his lifetime.

Towards the end of *Eleuthéria*, there's a lot of business with a supposed audience member who comes onto the stage to voice his objections to the bizarre proceedings. He consults his program to discover,

Au fait, qui a fait ce navet? (programme) Beckett (il dit : « Béquet ») Samuel, Béquet, Béquet, ça doit être un juif groenlandais mâtiné d'Auvergnat. (1995, p. 136)

In this manner Beckett, proposed to introduce himself to a French theatre-going public. It was the most direct reference to himself that he would ever make in his plays. Thereafter, he wrote himself almost out of the picture, acting in the spirit of the Beckettian surrogate in *Eleuthéria*, who does the equivalent scenographically. At the end of the play, as the stage direction tells it,

Il s'assied sur le lit, parallèle maintenant à la rampe. Il se lève après un moment, va au commutateur, éteint, regarde par la fenêtre, revient s'asseoir sur

le lit, face au public, il regarde le public avec application, l'orchestre, les balcons (le cas échéant), à droite, à gauche. Puis il se couche, le maigre dos tourné à l'humanité. (1995, p. 167)

Though the play reeks of autobiography, Victor Krap — as the hero is called — is not a portrait of the *artist* as a young misfit, since he's not an artist. That role is reserved to the aforementioned "Béquet". And the playwright's final gesture — by contrast with his Victor Krapp's — is not a renunciation but an annunciation of sorts — of the vortex into which the selfhood is sucked. In this respect Beckett's play is strongly reminiscent of *Out of the Picture*, a play written in 1937 for the Group Theatre (of London) by the poet and fellow-Irishman Louis MacNeice. At the end of MacNeice's play, the troubled hero disappears for good through a wall, a strange ending that may well have germinated the trope of the immured, immolated or immobilized subject on which Beckett would later play many ingenious and moving variations. Beckett was not in London in December 1937 when *Out of the Picture*, with music by Benjamin Britten, was unsuccessfully staged at the Westminster Theatre, but the play had been published several months earlier (Sidnell, p. 217-223). Indeed, Beckett had turned down the invitation to review it and had passed that job on to Blanaid Salkeld, whose interest in theatre and poetic drama were more developed at the time than his own (Bair, p. 258). Salkeld was disappointed by the poet's "prose play", though she acknowledged that it was "ingeniously constructed". And its ingenuity in construction seems to have been recalled by Beckett, perhaps unconsciously, as he drafted *Eleuthéria* ten years later.

Beckett follows MacNeice in trying to turn theatre inside out in *Eleuthéria*. This structural ambition is intimated from the beginning in the arrangement of the stage spaces, one inside the other, and seen from different perspectives in the three acts. Had he let his play run its wayward course without such structural ingenuity then it would have registered as a lyrical *cri du cœur* attributable to the authorial "Béquet"; but its theatrical introversion *almost* makes of *Eleuthéria* one of those modernist structures in which, as in Nietzsche's figure, the artist resembles "that uncanny image of fairy-tale, which can turn its eyes around and look at itself... simultaneously poet, actor, and spectator"

(p. 33). But it has to be “almost” because Beckett has split his suffering hero / artist into two distinct stage figures. This, perhaps, is a feature of the play's formal immaturity.

The invasion of the stage from the auditorium in *Eleuthéria* is often compared — for lack of another model rather than for any real resemblance — with Pirandello but it is much more directly reminiscent of W.H. Auden's early work for the stage, *The Dance of Death*. This political ballet with songs and dances set to music by Herbert Murrill was first performed in February 1934 at the Westminster Theatre (Sidnell, p. 62-90). Beckett was in London at the time and could have seen it then though there is no reason to suppose that he did. But he probably did see the revival in October 1935 when it was presented in a double bill with T.S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* for he wrote to MacGreevy about the Eliot piece, comparing it with the Thomas Otway's *The Soldier's Fortune*, which had a production at about the same time.

The marxist theme of *The Dance of Death* Beckett would have found tedious, in all likelihood, but the formal originality of Auden's conception, mixing modern dance, Brechtian didacticism, medieval morality, and Tudor interlude — in which “spectators” meddle with the on stage action might have been a theatrical eye-opener for Beckett.

Like MacNeice's *Out of the Picture*, the double bill of *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Dance of Death* was a Group Theatre production. And it is in a third play written for the Group Theatre that we find an antecedent for Beckett's radical and elaborate scenographic device in *Eleuthéria* of juxtaposed areas of the stage, hermetically sealed from each other but permeable to vibes of consciousness. This device had been anticipated by Auden and Christopher Isherwood in their *On the Frontier* of 1939 (Sidnell, p. 247).

All of which is to say that Beckett's first complete play is dramaturgically continuous with the pre-war experiments of the Group Theatre working with texts by Eliot and by Beckett's contemporaries MacNeice, Auden, Isherwood, and Stephen Spender. But unlike his poet-playwright precursors, Beckett was not mounting a deliberate assault on conventional theatre; nor working with a troupe of per-

formers with their own urgent program for theatrical revolution. Nor can it be claimed the *Eleuthéria* experiment was an especially productive attempt to dislodge feeble theatrical conventions, and to adapt theatre to Modernism.

In contrast with the Group Theatre collaborators, Beckett took to playwrighting rather in isolation. And he found relaxation and sociability in its ineluctable materiality: “dealing with a given space and with people in that space”, as he put it (1992, p. xiii). More than a relaxation, he was able to exploit theatre’s materiality and its multi-mediality in his response to a characteristic conundrum confronted by modernist artists. Romantic and nineteenth-century art had largely derived the coherence of self-expression from some conception of an integral self; in a most renowned formulation as “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (Coleridge, 1, p. 304). But Modernism marked selfhood as discontinuous, multivocal and conflicted (Brown, 1989): it could speak only provisionally and sceptically of the continuity of the “I”, which was nevertheless, at any moment, the immediate source of expression. How was such expression to attain the artistic coherence that its immediate source lacked?

One notable response in the writing of fiction to fragmented selfhood was to attribute utterances to multiple personae, objectified by their conditions and circumstances, through which the idioms of the pub, the hospital, the classroom or bedroom could speak, sometimes accompanied by a chorus of sheep, cockerels, dogs and such; or the significant sounds of twanging garters, creaking doors and mattresses; the annunciations of train whistles, bicycle bells, gravel under shoes — soundscapes like that of Beckett’s *All That Fall*.

But even the most rigorous efforts and ingenious devices of prose fail to suppress the speaking subject, to refine the writer-narrator out of existence. Indeed, there is a kind of law of inverse effects whereby the most radical attempts at objectivity became intrusions of the creative subject heroically striving for it. No amount of estranged idiom, broken grammar, disrupted narrative, inventive typography and book design can erase the suffering writer from the materiality and other-

ness of world from which he is alienated. Beckett's early fiction is riven with the vain struggle to escape from the amber of print, to break into materiality but without adopting supinely the performative prose style of his modernist master, James Joyce. Beckett's early work seems to cry out for multi-media activation to express the pathos of deprivation, and perhaps compensate for it, to render actual the sensuousness of sounds, sights, touch and, above all, sentient bodies.

A contrary strategy of preventing the germination of a self-delusory, overweening "I" at the expense of the work was to actually exploit this irrepressible subjectivity so ruthlessly that the old romantic ego was fully exposed in all its incoherence and vacuity almost as an impersonal object. As a figure of the objectified self, Joyce's Shem the Penman takes the biscuit. Shem is a kind of Joycean anti-self, one that Beckett's early heroes emulate but fall short of. This Shem is a squalid creature, holed up in his "House of the Haunted Inkbottle" and self-compelled to:

[...] produce nichthemericly from his unheavenly body a no uncertain quantity of obscene matter... with his double dye, brought to blood heat, gallic acid on iron ore, through the bowels of his misery... [this]... first-till-last alchemist wrote over every square inch of the only foolscap available, his own body, till by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integument slowly unfolded all ... cyclewheeling history (thereby, he said, reflecting from his own individual person life unlivable, trans-accidentated through the slow fires of consciousness into a dividual chaos, perilous, potent, common to allflesh, human only, mortal) but with each word that would not pass away the squid-self which he had squirtscreened from the crystalline world waned chagreenold and doriangrayer in its dudhud (Joyce, 1939, p. 185-6).

So, this abject Shem-self is transfixed and objectified, until its unlivable existence comes to represent all humanity.

Both the objectified *persona* through whom the world is uttered and the abject self on whom the world is inscribed are recognizable in Beckett's plays but subject to a mediation that gives his work a distinctive character. This mediation is the "Not-I" materiality of the stage, radio, TV and Film. Beckett may have taken a hint from the trope of radio broadcasting in several Group Theatre productions but in con-

structuring a stage poetics that deployed such devices Beckett was surely profoundly indebted to Arthur Rimbaud's modernist epiphany "Je est un autre" (Rimbaud, p. 345-352). In this Other, Rimbaud had fatefully encountered the "Not I" which, "by the disturbance of all the senses", made its "way towards the unknown", not as one who thinks but as one who is thought. The "Not I", which became the governing principle of Beckett's theatre (and writing), gave key poetic functions to theatre technologies new and old, and also imposed new hardships upon actors, not least in the constraints on their bodies or body parts. Nor was this otherness by any means a relief from such torments as the penman suffered: on the contrary, as Rimbaud declares, "the sufferings are immense".

The Rimbaldien "Not I", or other, the abjected Joycean Shem-self, and the objectified persona can all be referred to *Krapp's Last Tape*. Here the efforts — such as they are — made to comprehend past and present manifestations within a coherent individuality lead to misery and failure; as they have in the past also. What have these voices from the distant past — as mediated by the tape recorder — to do with the present listener-cum-recorder? Does it all cohere? But if the subjecthood of Krapp be a delusion, the sufferings endured are not. Krapp's tapes make the delusion clearly perceptible and the sufferings more acute.

More cheerfully, Beckett himself found some solace as a playwright in expressing the unspeakable-ineluctable in the "space and persons" of theatre, rather than in the loneliness of mere writing: writing, which — however disrupted —; tends to project — however misleadingly; a single — however divided — subject. Beckett's theatrical experiments, leading to figurations of indeterminate but abjected selfhoods mediated through theatrical materiality, were not so much responses to specifically dramaturgical issues as attempts to overcome obstacles to *artistic* creation. So much so, that Beckett could sacrifice the triad of devotional objects from which, since antiquity, theatre has taken its ordonnance and functions — the integral human body (whether Vitruvian or divine), the voice that issues from that body, and the human subject that they are supposed to constitute. Needless to say his

sacrificial rituals are inefficacious apart from whatever inheres in their theatricality. There are no implications of regeneration or transcendence in the enactments; no suggestions of access to a permanent symbolic world, or to a golden realm of imagination; no metaphorical palliatives. But the enactments do offer the emollient of humour.

These secular mysteries of Beckettian theatrical Modernism embody many ingenious devices to eradicate, so far as possible, the "I" from the creation that implies it, as the following brief inspection of them proposes to demonstrate. Confining my remarks almost entirely to Beckett's stage plays and to the three main sets of practices and devices that I have mentioned I turn first to emanations proceeding from off-stage; secondly to estrangements of speech and language, focusing on bilinguality; and finally to immobilizations, the encapsulations and the fragmentations of actor's bodies on stage. As it happens, my first two examples of emanations from off-stage are inextricable from the third category of corporeal subjugation.

### **Emanations**

In both *Not I* and *That Time*, two closely-related plays of the early 1970s, the stage figure is stringently reduced — to an isolated mouth seen at 3 metres above the stage floor in *Not I* and, in *That Time*, to a face, set off by flowing white hair, and also elevated to a height of 3 metres. These body parts are visited by powerful emanations from off-stage. In *Not I*, it is the narrowly-focused spotlight that isolates the mouth of the actor playing Mouth. The light makes visible what could be read in the program: that this speaking mouth is not the mouth of some character but Mouth herself, isolated from any auditor. Such bringing into view is a new creation of sorts. The spotlight on Mouth is Beckett's somewhat like the hand of Michelangelo's God reaching out to his Adam, except that the ultimate source of the light remains hidden.

**Sound**, in *That Time*, and **light** in *Not I* are emanations in counterpoint to each other; as listening is in counterpoint to speech in the two plays. Words are heard on stage in the one but not spoken there; spoken to no listener in the other. The three separate voices in *That Time* all belong to



the on-stage “Listener” (or “Souvenant” as Beckett names him in his French version – and variation). Characteristically, Beckett is insistent that the three voices must **not** be differentiated by obvious discontinuities but that nevertheless “the switch from one to another must be clearly [but] faintly perceptible.” If “threefold source and context prove insufficient to produce this [acoustic] effect”, Beckett says, then “it should be assisted mechanically (for example, with three-fold pitch)”. In short, the acoustic installation of the recorded voices is work for a sound artist like Janet Cardiff, or Nancy Tobin, such is its complexity and fundamental artistic importance. But what is the relation of the acoustic emanation to Listener, and the emanation of light in relation to Mouth? And what the origins of the voice and the light? Eventually I shall propose a crude answer to these questions.

The play called *Play*, which preceded *Not I* by about a decade, is a more complex work with respect to light, which has a tripartite form comparable with that of the voice in *That Time*. Here, Beckett requires that the source of light that cues each of the three faces in turn be in the stage space of “its victims”, as he calls them. So it is not an emanation in the way the *Not I* spotlight is; not an off-stage emanation at all, strictly speaking, though the lamp is sometimes located off-stage, despite Beckett's insistence on the point. Beckett is also definitive about **not** using three separate instruments, one for each face. There must be “a single mobile spot”, he says, “expressive of a unique inquisitor” (1968, p. 62). For this inquisitorial spotlight, other people had their own nicknames: “instrument of torture” was Billie Wilder's; “dentist's drill” was George Devine's; Alan Schneider called it “Sam”; “conductor's baton” is James Knowlson's suggestion. What these nicknames have in common is their recognition of the importance of this light, the attribution of power to a human agent, and their reference to the lighting instrument itself. But consider: **the lighting instrument is not the light**: scripture and astrophysics agree that it appeared right at the beginning and long before Adam, as is implied also in the dialogue about day and night Beckett's *Rough for Theatre 1* (1976, p. 72). As for Beckett's insistence on the “threefoldness” of sound and light in the instances cited, Coleridge's (1990, p. 77) names for the parts of the Trinity — minus theological implications — may account for the in-

sistence on three distinct but combined elements as a play, or dialectic, of "Ipseity, "Alterity", and "Community".

In a much earlier pair of plays, *Act Without Words I* and *II* Beckett employed off-stage emanations in simpler ways, using old-fashioned theatrical machineries allegorically. In the first of these mimes, the emanations are from the flies, which deliver to the figure on stage — and then retrieve — the tree, the branch, the rope, the scissors, the flask of water, and cubes that are calculated, by some malignant power, to torment the man to death, if only he could that *quietus* make. He is cued by the blast of a whistle, which he learns to ignore, refusing to be further enticed into the frustrating process — somewhat like Victor turning to face the wall in *Eleuthéria*. The controlling malignancy is an outside force of purely theatrical origin, as far as we can see, but yet it is keyed — whether as cause or effect — to the man's thought-processes.

In the second mime the equivalent emanation from off-stage is literally a goad — a pointed pole on wheels that prods the two characters into action, motivating the rounds of habit that will, in turn, cue the goad's prods. As is usual in the theatre, there is an impediment to perception where the stage-space and the off-stage space meet but if this veil were lifted we might comprehend fully the vicious cycle of action-emanation-action-emanation... and so on, in which theatre plays its part.

My last and most extreme example of emanations from off-stage is *Breath*, in which — setting aside the travesty staged by Kenneth Tynan — no part of a human figure appears. Sound and lighting constitute almost the entire work, and all there is of life, which emanates entirely from off-stage; the stage itself being reserved for a scattering of rubbish. It's only natural that we should think of sound and lighting, projectors, cameras, and stage-rigging, along with printing presses, TV and wireless as technologies at the disposal of human agents — people who know what they're doing with them. Marshall McLuhan supposed otherwise, and investigated ways in which such technologies insinuate themselves into human consciousness. But McLuhan's inversions of the common understanding appear incomplete in the context of Beckett's theatrical

poetics of self-abjection, objectification and otherness, and its self-conscious incorporation, in art, of such technologies.

### **Estrangement of speech and language**

Theatre customarily holds language up for inspection, testing it against speakers and their actions and motives. That has been one of its main activities. In *Hippolytos*, for example, Theseus, having been fatefully deceived and self-deceived by his wife's words and his son's, wishes that we had two languages at our disposal, one for everyday use and the other for dealing with truth (Euripides, 1973, p. 61). But the audience can see clearly where Theseus goes wrong; failing, on the one hand, to read hypocrisy between the lines and, on the other, to discern the contextual signs of sincerity. From the audience-position, speakers and their speech can be comprehended as a single identity.

With Beckett, the language problems and the theatrical probing of them are more basic and inconclusive. If the personages were fully present to themselves then the right words might come; and if words didn't slip and slide all over the place, they might be used to construct identities. But there are deficiencies on both sides that prevent such a fusion. Perhaps the deficiencies are inherent in human existence and expression.

From the first, Beckett's English was marked by its syntactical idiosyncrasy and erudite diction, its biblical and literary echoes, and its disruption of linguistic habit; all of which tended to estrange speech from speakers. Beckett is especially drawn to simple but unfamiliar words such as the one fixated on by Mrs. Rooney, in *All That Fall*: "hinny" (meaning the offspring of a she-ass and a stallion — and thus the genetic counterpart to a mule, which springs from a jack-ass and a mare). Among Beckett's choice words is "rack", a noun and a verb with many distinct meanings, among which the relevant one, in *Footfalls*, is the sense of "Clouds, or a mass of cloud, driven before the wind in the upper air", as *OED* ("rack n.") elegantly defines it.

The word "rack" appears in a bookish passage, that carries the aura of reading aloud; but it is indeterminable whether an invisible text is

read, or is recalled *verbatim* or — as in ordinary life — is under construction in the imagination. (Such estranging substitution of reading aloud for talking occurs in several Beckett plays.) In the early plays, especially, the audience's attention is drawn to words worth savouring, or looking up. The word that Krapp has to look up is “viduity”. He once used it in a recording session it has since dropped out of his vocabulary. He remains a connoisseur of verbal strangeness, though, almost drooling over the lip-puckering diphthong in that onomatopoeic word, “Spooooo!”

The great set-piece of linguistic estrangement in Beckett is doubtless Lucky's demonstration of thinking. A less extravagant set-piece (which actually echoes Lucky) comes from the dossier in *Rough for Theatre II*. It provokes from B, who is trying to read it aloud, the outraged demand “What kind of Chinese is that?... Shit! Where's the verb!” (1972, p. 92), before he begins a frantic search for that critical syntactical item. In the play called *Play* the language is estranged by its extreme banality, by *da capo* repetition repetition and, above all, by its delivery. Beckett calls elsewhere for flat, toneless speech but here he also wants “rapid tempo throughout” (Beckett 1968, p. 45) — so rapid, indeed, when done at the desired pace, it caused a serious quarrel at the National Theatre in London between the director, backing Beckett, and the literary manager (Kenneth Tynan) and his supporters, who were enraged by the violation of intelligibility (Knowlson, p. 516-17).

The speakers in *Play* are called M (for the man) and W1 and W2 for his two women. Here, as elsewhere, the algebraic notation keeps selfhood at bay; as does Beckett's second main mode of the naming of roles — by functions such as Listener, Voice, Mouth, Protagonist, Auditor, Animator and so on. In performance these figures — the term “characters” is inappropriate — are presented anonymously so the names are discernible only to the reader. Beckett's third main recourse in the naming of roles was to use common nouns or verbs, which register as such more or less emphatically in performance: Croak, Krapp, May, Hamm, Nagg, Winny, Fitt, Barrell and so on. The adjectivality of “Lucky” is anomalous.

In this third class of nouns, verbs and one adjective are the names in

*Come and Go*. Unusually for Beckett, this is a limpidly symbolist play, in which — as is the way with symbolists — women come as an undivided plurality, often, as here, threesome. Beckett's feminine trio bears names that are all homophones of both common nouns and verbs: Vi, Ru, and Flo. Suggestively, these names appear to be expressing themselves through their biological hosts, using the women's relationships for that purpose.

VI < VIOLET

<i>Violet</i>	n.	plant and flower of <i>viola</i> genus; bluish-purple colour; feminine proper name.
	adj.	of the colour of a violet, bluish-purple.
	vb.	to gather violets, to colour violet .
<i>vie</i>	vb.	to contend or compete with
	n.	a challenge

RU < RUBY

<i>Ruby</i>	n.	precious stone of crimson-red colour; feminine proper name.
	adj.	of the colour of a ruby
	vb.	to dye to the colour ruby
<i>rue</i>	vb.	to regret or repent of
	n.	shrub of <i>ruta</i> genus; sorrow, regret, compassion.

FLO < FLORENCE

<i>Florence</i>	n.	a coin, a type of fabric; a wench; English name for the city of Firenze, Italy; feminine proper name.
<i>Flow</i>	n.	movement or rate of current or stream; outpouring; incoming tide; a quicksand.
	vb.	to glide along, run smoothly like a river; to come or go in a stream (of people etc.)

The icing on the nominal cake is a similar, though less rich, word play — on “vie”, “flot”, “rue” (and “ruer”) — in the French version, *Va-et-vient* (1967). It suggests a fundamental phenomenon of linguistic commonality for the author to draw on and also, perhaps, bilingual premeditation on Beckett's part.

Beckett's bilinguality — and his audiences' awareness of it — is a facet of linguistic estrangement in his work that appears to have become more evident and formative with time. It has lately been complicated by vigorous efforts to recuperate for Beckett an Irish Protestant identity that he took into a supposed self-exile and which he revealed in

his Hiberno-English idioms, his topographical allusions, and even the theme of life-denial stemming from his historical membership in a community and class doomed to extinction by the emergence of an independent, Catholic, Irish state.

The misapprehension that Beckett's (Hiberno-) English and his French are in some way aligned with Irish selfhood and Gallic otherness may be further fostered by the recent publication of *Godot* in a bilingual edition. It is not the first such edition of a Beckett work but it is the most accessible. The editor of this bilingual *Godot* strenuously resists the assertion that the play is “unmistakenly [*sic*] Irish”, and his rather indignant response to this claim voices a main motive for the edition. “Viewed in its full multiplicity”, he says, the play “becomes at least as unmistakably [*sic*] French” (Beckett, 2006, p. vi). If this dispute over the Beckett legacy approximates the ever-more-pervasive genre of cultural farce, it also attests to an effect of Beckettian bilinguality, putting the audience on the linguistic “qui vive”.

Beckett's bilinguality is by no means a clear-cut phenomenon, not even in outline; nor can it be the same one viewed from French, Irish and English angles of vision. Beckett himself gave several reasons for his switch into French, including: the elimination of style; an escape from linguistic habit; and a discipline of linguistic impoverishment. The fact that Beckett also retained English as a language of composition has aroused less curiosity, as though that were the natural thing to do. It was not merely a reversion: a reversal made to re-access style; to revert to comfortable habits of tongue; to switch back from linguistic impoverishment to linguistic enrichment — though he did at one time fear that he was losing his aptitude in English. Nor, indeed, can it quite be said that after a French linguistic purgation Beckett reverted to English, as a playwright, though most of the plays which appeared after *Fin de partie* were, in fact, first written in English, and a half a dozen of these were not translated by Beckett himself.

At the moment, my concern is not so much the linguistic processes of bilingual creation and self-translation, fascinating though these are, but with the ways in which the fact of bilinguality affects the reception of

Beckett's work, as it seems to do more and more. We habitually look for the convergence of origin and utterance in a unitary self-identity — especially in the theatre — and one of the means that Beckett used to make such a convergence elusive was bilinguality.

A passage in the late play *Ohio Impromptu* to illustrate the elusiveness. It goes:

In a last attempt to obtain relief he moved from where they had been so long together to a single room on the far bank. From its single window he could see the downstream extremity of the Isle of Swans.

*Pause.*

Relief he had hoped would flow from unfamiliarity. Unfamiliar room. Unfamiliar scene. Out to where nothing ever shared. Back to where nothing ever shared. From this he had once half hoped some measure of relief might flow.

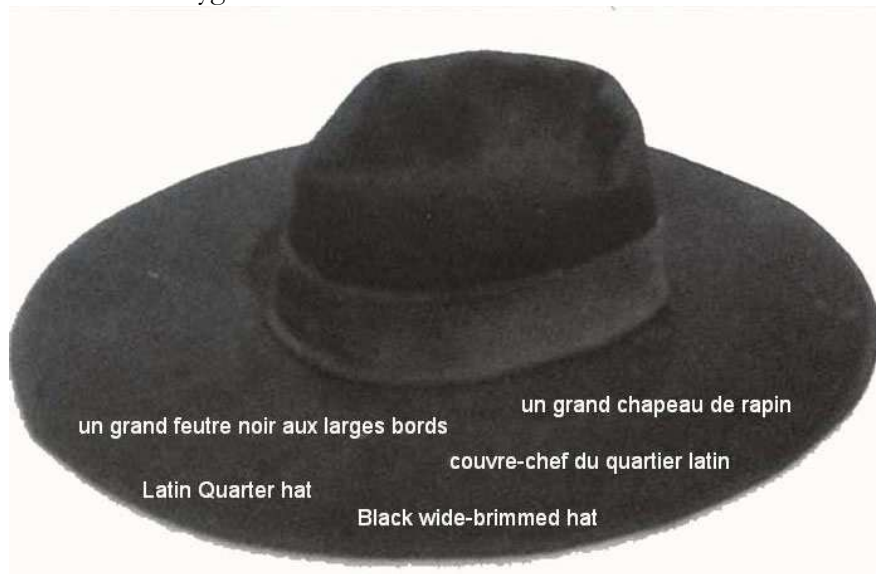
*Pause.*

Day after day he could be seen slowly pacing the islet. Hour after hour. In his long black coat no matter what the weather and an old world Latin Quarter hat. At the tip he would always pause to dwell on the receding stream. How in joyous eddies its two arms conflowed and flowed united on (Beckett, 1984b, p. 12-13).

What is the original language of this passage? “Obtain relief” verges on translatoresque. But that might well be an attribute of the text from which the Reader is reading aloud to the unspeaking Listener. The phrase “nothing ever shared” is unidiomatic enough to require reflection about whether “shared” is in the passive voice (a participle lacking its auxiliary verb) and meaning “nothing **was** ever shared” or the grammatically sufficient use of the active voice, since things, as well as a persons, may be said to “share”: meaning “nothing ever shared” anything with anything else. Unambiguously, the French text uses a participle here, “où jamais rien partagé” (Beckett, 1982, p. 61), and is therefore in the passive voice without the auxiliary verb; and so we may assume that the passive voice is intended in English also, despite the incomplete grammar. That is, “nothing **was** ever shared.”

The word “Islet” is decidedly literary but again this may be attributed to the style of the book being read. It refers to the “Isle of Swans”, earlier mentioned, and therefore conjures up Paris, though without declaring an originary language. It will also call Joyce and young Beckett to the minds of those who know something of Beckett's

quite-well-known life; how, when the two of them walked together, the Allée des Cygnes was their favourite haunt.



“Latin Quarter hat” surely sounds like a phrase originating in English; one that would not, perhaps, translate readily into French. It will certainly sound English to the quite numerous listeners who recall it from Joyce’s *Ulysses* as Buck Mulligan’s designation of the headgear that Stephen Dedalus (for whom it is his “Hamlet hat”) wears around Dublin, to show off (Joyce, 1961, p. 17, 47). Beckett’s French version of the hat is more resonantly “un grand chapeau de rapin” (Beckett, 1984b, p. 61). And this, as it happens, also contrasts with the more direct equivalent to “Latin Quarter hat” that we find in a Joyce-supervised translation of *Ulysses*, in which it becomes the comically simple “couvre-chef du quartier latin” (Joyce, 1968, p. 18). And then again, Beckett’s stage directions, in two languages, which place the hat prominently on the table, do so in the even plainer language of “un grand feutre noir aux larges bords” (Beckett, 1982, p. 60) and a “Black wide-brimmed hat” (Beckett, 1984b, p. 11).

In summary — and to have done with hattery — whether or not the verbal hats in *Ohio Impromptu* be versions of one and the same material object, the



four prose inscriptions of it (or them) — two in each language — refer to it (or them) quite diversely. This leaves a sense of linguistic strangeness, which begins with the quest for unfamiliarity undertaken by the unknown person who wrote the book now being read aloud.

Is this a Parisian scene, perceived through the prism of English; or is it recalled in the linguistic genius of the place and later subjected to translation; or is it, after all, Gallo-Irish subjectivity haunted by Joycean times past? These issues would be more approachable if the words heard could be attributed to a speaker, but we have no such figure, merely the one who listens and his likeness who reads. Their relation with each other is as indeterminate as their relation with that absent other who sought relief in unfamiliarity and wrote about it.

Turning now from devices of linguistic estrangement, which disrupt the age-old theatrical association of speech and speakers, voice and body, I take up, finally and briefly, those having to do with human figures on Beckett's stages.

### **Bodies**

In *Breath*, as has been mentioned, Beckett not only got rid of speakers but also of words, and not just speakers and words but also of human bodies, that is to say he got rid of most of what theatre has been — at least, he thought he'd got rid of human bodies until he learned that, in *Breath*'s first staging, Kenneth Tynan had littered the stage with naked actors. Beckett eventually put an end to the travesty (Knowlson, 1996, p. 566).

In all Beckett's other stage plays, actors are, by some theatrical means, constrained, immobilized or — as in *Not I* and *That Time* — reduced to a body fragment — sometimes at the cost of almost intolerable discomfort for the actor. With these devices he followed in the wake of a line of playwrights and directors, mostly symbolists of some kind — Maeterlinck, Craig, Yeats, Meyerhold — who sought to limit or control the infiltration of nature into the theatrical artwork in the person of the actor. W.B. Yeats, Beckett's direct precursor in this respect, reports one of his fantasies about the training of actors:

I had once asked a dramatic company to let me rehearse them in barrels that they might forget gesture and have their minds free to think of speech for a while. The barrels, I thought, might be on castors, so that I could shove them about with a pole when the action required it (Yeats, 1962, p. 86-87).

The pole used to propel the wheelchair in *Rough for Theatre I*, the castors on Hamm's armchair in *Endgame*, the ashbins in which Hamm's parents reside, and the funereal urns in *Play*, are all fulfillments, of a sort, of Yeats's yearnings; and these immobilizations do indeed throw emphasis on speech, though with effects roughly opposite to those that Yeats had in mind.

The ashbins that accommodate Nagg and Nell in *Endgame* evolved from an on-stage coffin (Gontarski, 1985, p. 50). Perhaps Beckett found this old Irish trope of the corpse waking up to take part in the wake (as in *Happy as Larry*, Donagh MacDonagh's verse play of 1946) too hackneyed. He certainly found the coffin distracting, especially when its denizen was inactive. The ashbins, however, proved convenient means of bringing a pair of lesser characters on and off stage — so convenient so that they have inspired additions to the basic scenographic resources of such theatricalist practitioners as Théâtre de Complicité. They enable cuing from on-stage, immediate appearances and extremely quick exits when the lids are raised or lowered; and this without the nuisance of fictional motivation for their comings and goings. The dead parents can appear when wanted and disappear when not. The scenographic convenience of the ashbins derives partly from their status as scenic objects unencumbered by supernatural baggage. Nagg and Nell are not real ghosts — which are notoriously difficult to stage — but stagey embodiments of mental objects.

The really ghostly presences of the later plays are purely or partly mental figures, called to the mind's eye by words, as in *Ohio Impromptu*. In *Play*, however, the dead are both physically-embodied and really dead, reduced to faces, the faces further reduced by their decayed features. But these descendants of Yorick have nobody to say a kind word about them: they must speak for themselves. In theatrical effect, these faces surmounting the urns have little in common with the pop-up

heads of *Endgame*. The resemblance between ashbins and urns — which, as Gontarski reports (Gontarski, 1985, p. 92), replaced the white boxes of an early draft of the play) is superficial.

In *Play*, the spatial rhythms of the shapes, volumes and placement of the urns were as key to the work as the orchestration of the voices, the two coming together in a purgatorial image of acoustic fixity and visual fixity that nevertheless — and appallingly — has duration; in which the whole content of the endless present is an episode from the past. Beckett considered and re-considered the urns and faces from production to production, trying to get them just right, moving them closer, tightening the necks. They were not to be jolly and comfortable but slim and only one metre tall, which meant using traps or having the actors kneel. Allowing the actors to sit was out of the question. And the faces, for all their decay, must be faces, says Beckett — not masks. The actors, that is to say, are subjected to considerable discomforts in the interests of the reduction and encapsulation of their bodies and the creation of the theatrical image. Importantly, the spectators can hardly be unaware of these discomforts and this consciousness is more than incidental to the reception of the work: it contributes to the ritualistic effect.

The third means of holding in check the natural body — that chimera of selfhood — is its immobilization, and this, again, is differently done in the earlier and later stage plays. The earlier ones impose physical restraints — Lucky's rope, Hamm's armchair, the wheelchair in *Rough for Theatre I*. In *Happy Days* immobilization took what was later seen to be a form intermediate between confinement and fragmentation: Winny's body appeared distinctly unwhole at its first appearance but, in retrospect, so much of her torso is usable that it belongs with the physically-constrained category rather than with the corporeal fragments of *Not I* or *That Time*.

In *Footfalls*, the physical constraint is psychosomatic — or perhaps theatrically arbitrary: the pacing figure actually mobile but within a severely limited and repetitive range. In *Rough for Theatre II*, the potential suicide is totally immobile, as well as silent; and in *Catastrophe*, Protagonist, as the figure is called, is in almost the same condition.

Why do these figures remain transfixed? What constrains them? In *Catastrophe* — an extraordinarily political play for Beckett and unusual in other ways — a kind of answer is given; one that will also serve, I think, for the questions posed earlier about the origins of light and sound. It is my final example.

*Catastrophe* is presented as a rehearsal for the final tableau of a play about a catastrophe. In the envisaged performance, the play is to leave the spectators with the affecting image of Protagonist, clad in his torn, greyish night attire. To achieve this effect, his robe is removed in the course of this “rehearsal”. This costume adjustment brings the Director closer to the desired visual image, though it leaves Protagonist shivering. Further adjustments are made to expose more of Protagonist’s flesh, sharpening the pathos. In the envisaged performance, Protagonist will stand on a pedestal which will be high enough — according to the note dictated by the Director — to make the toes visible. Protagonist’s flesh and cranium will be whitened, in accordance with another note taken; and the hands will be as set-up in this rehearsal, crippled, claw-like and limp. The head will be — as adjusted in this rehearsal — held low enough to obscure the face but not so low as to overstate the abjection. At the very end, there is to be a tremendous lighting effect: a fade-out on Protagonist, a pause, and then a fade-up that lights the head alone, the bowed head. The Director is well pleased with his modelling of Protagonist, “He’ll leave them on their feet”, he says, “I can hear it from here.” (Beckett, 1984b, p. 36)

Protagonist’s body is immobile in the rehearsal, except for the adjustments made to it by the Assistant — and the shivering, of course — but at the very end of *Catastrophe*, the scene shifts to envision, proleptically, the forthcoming performance. At first, the applause is indeed enthusiastic, as the Director had foretold, but it falters and dies as Protagonist “raises his head and fixes the audience”. Beckett’s stage direction endows Protagonist with a momentary autonomy that fixes the spectators who are more than spectators for they are participating in this ritual we call “theatre”. Whatever its claims to non-complicitous representation, this ritual is not exempt from the general catastrophe of human existence. Like every other part of human exist-

tence theatre cannot do other than enact that catastrophe.

The figure of the Director in *Catastrophe* cannot be altogether remote from self-critique of the meticulous Beckett who made such rigorous demands on his actors in pursuit of new resources of theatrical — that is to say human — expression. This immanence of theatre made at some human cost, may be a reason — though not always sufficient reason — for Beckett's attempts (and those of his executors) to retain control over productions done in his name. His plays are not museum installations, but the prescribed details of their material presentation are as fundamental as they are to other plastic arts or, for that matter, to ritual that encompassed even Modernism.

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