

Beckett and Beyond: A Review

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Collecting the papers presented in the 1991 International Symposium on Samuel Beckett, *Beckett and Beyond* came out last year under the aegis of the Princess Grace Irish Library, edited by Bruce Stewart¹. A number of distinguished scholars of international reputation participated of the event, and the proceedings, published in 1999, provide us an in-depth view of the studies of Beckett's works and of their resonance in areas such as philosophy, literature, language, translation and media, just to mention some.

Were the papers to be assorted in groups or sections categorized according to their themes, the largest group would be the one focusing on Beckett's theater. Text scrutiny and intertextuality provide the tools for the analyses, focused on objects that range from the use of silence or the relationship between stage signs and icons to Beckett's relationship with contemporary dramatists.

A second division of the papers would subsume another considerably large, yet more specific, group, related to the first: the one dedicated to the relationship between Beckett's theater and literature, particularly from the point of view of his incredibly diversified literary sources. The papers rated here would be the ones that examine the links between Beckett's work and the ones of other canons of European literature such as Dante, John Ford, Leopardi, Baudelaire, Camus, and Joyce.

Particularly representative of the complexity of the papers comprised in the volume is the third group, focusing on philosophical and theoretical aspects elicited by Beckett's literature. Once again, the emphasis falls on the density and multifariousness of Beckett's production, grounded on the assimilation of concepts enrooted in areas that include psychoanalysis and metaphysics, particularly ontology and epistemology.

Beckett's incredibly instigating dissection of language and of its presumed communicative exhaustion is the center of a fourth group, where translation is included. Two other sections would cover the aspects of Beckett's relationship with postmodernism and with media, particularly radio and film.

The first group of papers, in this hypothetical sorting, opens with Normand Berlin's "Beyond Beckett - Before Beckett"², where the author tries to rediscover drama that historically preceded Beckett taking the Irish dramatist as the chief guide. His aim is the examination of some moments in traditional drama Beckett came to experience more fully.

Considering Shakespeare more closely connected to Beckett than to any other playwright, Berlin points out the ways Beckett allows us to see Shakespeare more clearly. An interesting insight into Beckett's remarkably allusive nature can be found in Berlin's references to *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, and *Waiting for Godot*, setting up a parallel between the latter and the revival of O'Neill's reputation in 1956.

The counterfactual background in Beckett's plays is discussed in Colin Duckworth's

Beyond the stage space³. For the author, the center of dramaturgical interest in Beckett's theater (in the plays of his maturity, more precisely) does not lie within the visible mimetic space, but in some other region, buried in the verbal message. Contrasting the minimal theater space and maximal evocation, Duckworth shows how Beckett evolved from a mimetic and still sparsely conventional use of mimetic space to a more complex relationship between on-stage signs and icons to possible worlds beyond it.

Silence is another element analysed in the discussion of Beckett's theatrical language: for James Frish⁴ silence is the means through which dramatic action occurs in Beckett's theater, particularly through what he calls "counter emotions of units".

Havel is another playwright concerned with the use of silence: for him, exquisite ironies and acquiescence to an oppressive regime are entailed through Beckett's use of silence.

If silence can be an effective means of probing into Beckett's theatrical lines, the author's achievement in dialogue can also be presumed to have considerable complexity. This is Andrea Kennedy's point⁵ in her study of Beckett's soliloquising. For the author, Beckett sustained creative innovation and was always going beyond his own previous work, what makes it virtually impossible to go "beyond him".

Listening and talking are the two major types of Beckettian plays as designated in Marek Kedzierski's "Image and voice in Beckett"⁶, particularly in the late plays, free of any character-in-setting pattern, and independent of social and historical time and space indicators. Listening is the result of an unembodied voice whose influence can be observed on the stage, as in *That Time or Ghost Trio*. Talking is developed without the unseen voice: what is performed stands in an equivocal relationship to what is said, as in *A Piece of Monologue*, or *Ohio Impromptu*.

As concerns characters, they are said to occupy a more limited space in Beckett's theater than in his fiction - this is the central idea in Geneviève Chevalier's study⁷. For the author, represented space is bound to the time and place of the performance, and characters have no existence beyond the curtain. Whatever is going to happen to any of the characters, it can only be narrated (not acted); therefore, what is beyond the stage is, presumably, less a theatrical object than an object of fiction. In Chevalier's polemical analysis, what is beyond the stage is dangerous; yet, it delimitates the inside and gives it a meaning. Characters, for their part, go through a ritual which progressively rids them of the contingent aspect of the physical world.

A different, yet correlated approach is developed by Ruby Cohn's in his paper⁸: discussing *Rockaby*, he states that Beckett does not preach a passive acceptance of death. It is Barbara Hardy⁹, however, who will more extensively discuss the representation of inanimated objects in Beckett's theater: the things in Beckett's texts are profoundly and self-consciously imagined. The reduction and the denuding of things are ordinary and strange, and appear out of proportion to their surroundings, as in a surrealist painting. Beckett's means of animating things is showing them by imagination. For Hardy, props are more self-consciously present, in Beckett's plays, than in most others.

The central topic of the second largest category of papers in *Beckett and Beyond*, Beckett's literary sources, are examined and discussed not only in Beckett's theater but also in his prose. This is the case with "A Mermaid Made over: Beckett's 'Text' and John Ford", by John Piling¹⁰, where the author analyzes the prose poem or prose fragment first published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1932, and which found its way into section two of the novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. The principal source, for Piling, is John

Ford's drama: of the two hundred words of Text, more than twenty are taken over from Ford, particularly from *The Lover's Melancholy*, *The Broken Heart*, *'Tis Pity she's a Whore*, *Love's Sacrifice* and *Perkin Warbeck*.

Beckett's reading of Baudelaire is the point in Hersh Zeifman's *From That Time to No Time: Closure in Beckett's Drama*¹¹. Zeifman analyzes Hamm's reference to Baudelaire in *Endgame*, transforming Baudelaire's linearity into circularity.

This process, which undermines the desire for closure in the play, somehow anticipates Beckett's presumed stance in the final decade of his playwriting, which, for Zeifman, gradually moved closer to an acceptance of the Absolute, or of its "relative presence".

"*Joyce seen by Beckett*" is another study categorised in this group, where Beckett's theater is discussed from the point of view of its literary sources. The author, Kevin Dettmar¹², operates a paradigm of literary history to the literature of Joyce's period: Joyce and not Joyce, or, more concretely, Joyce and Beckett. Dettmar points to the fact that, after spending the early years of his career trying to follow Joyce's footsteps, Beckett rebelled against identification with Joyce's techniques or achievements. The remarks Beckett made on this respect had enduring effects, constructing a beckettian view of Joyce's work, and, at the same time, downplaying his own continuity with the Joycean project.

In Adele King's paper, "Camus and Beckett"¹³, a parallel with the French existentialist is put forward, evincing the way rational language and rhetoric are mocked in both *L'etranger* and *Waiting for Godot*. For King, *Molloy*, *Godot* and *L'etranger* embody a spirit of disillusionment with the values enshrined in Western civilization, what makes it possible to read them as forms of writing essentially against patriarchy.

Beckett's correspondence is another topic of utmost importance among the papers rated in this group: having written over fifteen thousand letters, widely scattered in public and private collections worldwide, Beckett provided precious material for scholars, critics and interpreters.

Martha Fehsenfeld and Lois Overbeck¹⁴ tackle some of these aspects in their study of Samuel Beckett's correspondence. Providing an insight into the author's revisions, choices and abandonments, Beckett's letters provide evidence about the relationship between his writing to XX century painting, music and philosophy.

Part of the letters highlighted by the authors, such as the ones exchanged with the director of the National Gallery of Ireland, engage a continuing dialogue on art and artist. Also highly illustrative of Beckett's position (especially as concerns artistic freedom) are the letters written to the Archbishop of Dublin, protesting the refusal of a request for a Votive Mass to celebrate the Dublin Theater Festival, on the grounds that the program included plays by Sean O'Casey and McClelland.

Another extremely pertinent discussion of literary aspects in Beckett's works is performed in Linda Ben-Zvi's study of Beckett's aborted fragments¹⁵. Ben-Zvi focuses on *Human Wishes*, Beckett's first attempt at drama, an aborted text written in 36 and based on the life of Dr. Samuel Johnson.

The characters are all women, inhabitants of Samuel Johnson's home, waiting for an unmanned man on an unadorned stage; the work, however, counters the recurring claim that Beckett's plays privilege women. It is true that the text, which is the very first thing Beckett wrote for the stage, does illustrate his choice to focus on females and marginalised males, who are depicted as dead, late, asleep or inebriated.

Ben-Zvi's observes, however, that such a choice is not contingent, and shows the author's option for a theater that is feminine in the three acceptions of the word:

- 1) showing characteristics traditionally assumed to be intrinsic to women, especially concerning female tactics for survival;
- 2) adopting a type of writing that controverts the law of the Father (the phallic agency);
- 3) and using theatrical depiction arising from the representation of women on the stage.

Ben-Zvi's point is that the idea of feminine in Beckett implies more than a matter of gender or sexual figuration. For her, Beckett's decision to keep the sexes separate, as well as his refusal to cross-gender, result from the existence of two loci observed in his plays (the ontological and the societal one), and not from his will to prevent ellision of the sexes

The complexity of Beckett's works triggers a third series of investigations of utmost importance in the studies discussed herein: the one dedicated to philosophical aspects.

The concept of negativity, by Marius Buning¹⁶, could open this series with its discussion of the aspects of Beckett's works that seem to defy verbalisation. Buning's starting point is the publication of the anthology of theoretically-oriented essays entitled *The Languages and the Unsayable: the Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, which he rates as the most wide ranging study of the phenomenon of negativity in literary and philosophical discourse.

Buning traces a brief historical summary of the studies of negation from Plato to Derrida, raising a host of questions elicited by the phenomenon of negation. What attracts Buning to the theme is the fact that negation is a form of discourse which attempts to articulate the unsayable, the unwritten and the unwritable, as well as the unsayable and the unsaid.

Observing general patterns of negativity linked with Beckett's work, Buning stresses Beckett's attempts to avoid speaking, as well as the painful awareness of absence in the later plays and his strategies of evasion.

For the critic, Beckettian negativity should be approached in analogy with the discourse of negative theology and mysticism. This is why Buning sketches a history of negativity from Plato to Derrida, posing a host of pertinent questions raised by the phenomenon of negation. Aiming at investigating its processes, he finally describes it as a form of discourse that attempts to articulate the unwritten and the unwritable, as well as the unsayable and the unsaid.

Constant interplay between presence and absence, maximal negation and minimal affirmation may lure presence into absence, but ends up by subverting that presence and turning it into a carrier of absence, of which the readers would otherwise be unaware.

Another insight into the speculative nature of Beckett's work is performed by Thomas Coussineau¹⁷ in his approximation between Beckett's trilogy and Deleuze's and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. The central argument is based on the assumption that the family in a capitalist society initiates the infant into a world characterized by domination and repression, teaching him that desire is essentially a form of lack for which he must compensate by imposing ever more alienating forms of repression on himself.

Coussineau argues that Beckett has anti-Oedipal tendencies that progressively generate a more extreme dismemberment of the family, undertaken by each of the three novels.

For him the family unit is seriously under attack in Beckett's trilogy, and its disappearance as a central subject is one of the most striking facts. Instead of the family, Beckett explores the region of the unconscious, which has not been territorialized by Oedipal structures. Through the replacement of representation by repetition, Beckett produces the proliferation of de-Oedipalized techniques

Coussineau also believes that directors are generally mistaken in departing from

Beckett's requirements. For him Beckett did not create a genuinely new theatrical aesthetic, but replaced traditional theatre with a theater where stage image is emancipated from all models. By doing so, Beckett's plays stage the return of a pre-conceptual experience which is beneath representation. Emphasis is placed not on image itself, but on the barely perceptible gap between divergent images simultaneously present.

A bridge between past and future - this is the aspect of Beckett's stance in contemporary criticism highlighted by St. John Butler ¹⁸ in his paper. For him, Beckett's texts fit into the new paradigm of Western consciousness, comprehended under such terms as postmodernism and poststructuralism: Beckett would be a deconstructionist "avant la lettre", a kind of Janus-faced figure in an essentially crucial position - the one of speaking about the impossibility of speaking.

Rather than a postmodernist, Gottfried Büttner ¹⁹ rates Beckett as a "modern initiate", the title of another paper comprised in this hypothetical grouping of the papers in Beckett and beyond. Büttner distinguishes three forms of initiation: two which integrate the initiate into society by making him/her achieve a higher or superior state, and the third one, which sets him/her apart.

For Büttner, looking at Samuel Beckett as a modern initiate means to consider the question of the author's spiritual freedom. Beckett's desperate spiritual desolation is the crucial point: the critic believes Beckett, selfless as he was, gave us a true picture of the inner needs of his time as he experienced it.

His argument is that, as a result, we should not only appreciate him as the most important writer of today, but as a modern initiate who opened up again the entrance into the spiritual world around us through his method: the one of internalisation and contemplation.

It is Annamaria Sportelli ²⁰, however, who tackled the aspect perhaps most widely and commonly associated to Beckett in the history of theater forms: his condition as an absurdist.

Avoiding references to texts like *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, by Camus, and Adorno's Study of Endgame in favor of an etymologic study of the word, the author examines Beckett's playing with stranger systems of generalisation of which geometry is one.

The discussion of Beckett's works in the light of an etymologic study of the word serves to prove the critic's central hypothesis: the one that the absurd, together with the premises of reason, is comprised both in the semanticism and in the modellisation of the XVIII century world.

The theoretical support is the one of Juri Lotman's *Tipologia della Cultura*, source of the two fundamental assumptions of the paper: the one that argues that any model of the world implies its own semantic interpretation of that world, and the one that states that any language becomes the metalanguage of the type of culture it describes, thus yielding a correlation of the models of a culture with the texts it comprehends.

"Language investigation", the theme of the following group of papers, is the topic in Carla Locatelli's study ²¹. Dealing with the linguistic resistance which Beckett underscores, Locatelli produces an analysis centered on Beckett's idea of language. This, in its turn, leads to a discussion of the philosophical implications of the Beckettian unwording.

For the critic, Beckett's love for words made him perceptive of the inanity of words rather than of the "falsehood" his contemporaries were concerned with. Beckett's linguistic practice was always connected to a cognitive and ethical quest which exempts him from the "complacency of postmodern artifacts".

For Locatelli, with Beckett's later works, we are not faced with the prescriptions of a

minimalist poetics, but with classical avant-garde and with an unprecedented critique of traditional logocentrism.

To what extent do texts actually reflect Beckett's final conceptions? This is one of the questions raised by James Knoulson's paper²², also comprehensively categorised in this group focused on language aspects.

It is widely known that Beckett effected changes as he directed his own texts. Knoulson observes that, seven or eight years before his own death, Beckett said that the texts were all in a terrible mess. For the critic, this eventually leads to three hypotheses: that there had been discrepancies between the different editions, that an eventual source of such discrepancies is the use of different languages, and that the state of the texts no longer reflected the way in which he wanted them to be played.

Beckett's bilingual work is the object of still another paper in this same category: the one presented by Charles Krance²³, claiming a preeminently postmodern and post-Babelic stance for Beckett. For the critic, only a bilingual reading as conceived by the author can assure a safe way of giving a glimpse of his unique oeuvre.

Antonia Rodriguez Gago²⁴, who also elaborated on the aspect of translation in Beckett's work, examined the matter from a rather different point of view: the one of the problems observed in the translation of Beckett's works, understood mostly as an act of adaptation.

For Gago, free translations are bad translations, while literal translations are impossible to be carried out. Beckett's bilingualism is, for her, a great help, since it enables the translator to observe how Beckett solved a particular problem.

Gago was at the same time fortunate and privileged to have her translations of *Rockaby*, *Ohio Impromptu* and *Catastrophe* annotated by Beckett: she sent them to him and he quickly returned them with comments. His scarce suggestions refer to structure, but facilitated Gago's task of making Beckett's voices sound poetically in Spanish, too.

Postmodernism, aforementioned and discussed in Locatelli's paper on *Endgame*, is the topic in the fifth group, where it is the topic most specifically investigated. Stan Gontarski²⁵, who studied Beckett's notebooks in the light of postmodern theories, examined the revisions done by Beckett, and concluded that the process of publication (especially initial publication) signaled, for Beckett nothing like the termination of the creative process or even the "completion of a work". Tendency toward revision suggests, for Gontarski, an instability and a theatrical insufficiency, a kind of uncompleteness. Beckett directed some sixteen stage productions of his work and some five works for German TV, each time making adjustments. This produced multiple versions of the creative process in his work, while published documents represent an incomplete stage of the works' creation as a whole.

Beckett's notebooks offer a wealth of information not available in the printed texts. How publication of theatrical notebooks will affect future performances is difficult to predict, but the plurality of texts implicit in *The Reverse Acting Texts*, and in *The Theatrical Notes* can easily be inferred.

Another careful investigation of postmodernism implied in Beckett's work underlies the paper presented by Giuseppina Restivo entitled "Caliban/Clov and Leopardi's boy: Beckett and Postmodernism"²⁶, where the author shows recurrent aspects in Beckett's theater, particularly in *Endgame*. The title hinted chess game and multiple quotations. It leads back to Marcel Duchamp, Beckett's friend and chess expert, author of a treatise on special cases of "endgame" in which the outcomes of the third and final phase of a game of chess are analysed.

It echoes the enigmatic chess game in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, evoked in Hamm's words from Prospero's "our revels" passage, actualised, in its turn, in T.S. Eliot's reference to the *Tempest* and the chess game metaphor in *The Waste Land*.

The link between Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Beckett's *Endgame*, however, implies not only the obvious "revels passage" or the chess game, but a closer link between Clov and Caliban, cutting through the structure of Beckett's play and its central opposition between a master and a servant.

In *The Tempest*, Caliban is finally freed by a departing Prospero, and solves his love-hatred relationship with him by acknowledging his master's qualities. In *Endgame*, Clov's repetitive love-hatred attitude towards his master does not change.

The author discusses the link between the two plays through Juri Lottman's theory of cultural codes. Seen through it, the negation present in both "récits" can be explained as today's necessary exploration of the two different possible outcomes of one code our culture is heir to, exposed in the link between the two plays.

Beckett appears to be restating at a further level the philosophical problem which had been posed at the close of the age of the enlightenment during the beginning of the 19th. century by Leopardi. For the author, Leopardi can be recognized as the second major influence on Beckett after Dante. The analogy of positions seems to suggest Leopardi's influence on Beckett's criticism of the code he is exploring in *Endgame*, and a specific possible meaning in the outcome of the chess game between Hamm and Clov.

By adding Beckett to Leopardi and vice-versa, the process of contemporary culture leading to postmodernism becomes clearer. Postmodernism is Beckett's immediate beyond, and can acquire a new sense as one of the main codes Lottman describes as typical of western civilization.

Winding up the series of papers in the new sorting sketched here, two extremely pertinent elaborations allow us to briefly apprehend the complexity of the relationship between Beckett and the media, particularly radio and cinema.

James Acheson's paper ²⁷ deals with *Film*, a motion picture script written and produced in the 60's, but bearing strong similarities with the films in the 20's.

For Acheson the epigraph, taken from Berkeley, indicates that self-perception is central to *Film*. Berkeley considers the existence of unthinking things, with no relation to their being perceived, perfectly unintelligible. In a similar process, "O" (a character), who wants to attain a state of non being, believes he must avoid being perceived. Tearing up a print representing God's face, he remains anxious about the blank spot on the wall. "E", the part of himself that engages in self perception, replaces divine observation and maintains "O" in being. Introspection is shown as a definitely painful experience, and the protagonist, as Beckett observes in the Prefatory Notes to the script, is sundered into object and eye.

For Acheson, this idea is enrooted in Schopenhauer's conception of the imperceptibly operating force of will, which Beckett himself seems to echo in his comments of the script.

Another source for *Film* is *Murphy*, Beckett's early novel whose main character attains to nothing through imperfect dedication to aestheticism.

Beckett's radio play, *All that Fall*, is the theme of Enoch Brater's paper ²⁸ that winds up this group of presentation focusing Beckett's relationship with media. A celebration and at the same time a discovery of the radio as a new medium, *All that Fall* evinces Beckett's commitment to language, which achieves its fulfilment in the use of voice.

In radio, words meet their essentially physical root: they become an active force,

requiring more grammatical sense. Beckett conceives of language as a repository of possible pitches, durational divisions, amplitudes and timbres. Silence quantifies the existence of the protagonist and shows Beckett's faith in the vitality of language. In the acts of listening - in silence, specially - one has moments of lucidity.

Beckett and Beyond represents, by all means, an extraordinary effort of analysis and criticism in which Beckett's thoughtful and lucid speculations are investigated and discussed, thus opening the path for contemporary re-readings of Beckett's works. The wide ranging series of theoretical approaches contained in the volume is comprehensively and effectively applied without limiting the scope to the academically conventionalized aspects, or appealing to scholarly vogues doomed to disappear.

Samuel Beckett is one of the indisputable playwrights of twentieth century world, and the compilation of studies carried out in this volume is unquestionably worth of his artistry and complexity.

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