



*Beckett's audio-visuals :
staging the issueless predicament of existence*

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Beckett's audio-visuals : staging the
issueless predicament of existence

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1.

“Beckett’s dark plays are plays of light, where the desperate object created is witness to the ferocity of the wish to bear witness to the truth. Beckett does not say ‘no’ with satisfaction ; he forges his merciless ‘no’ out of a longing for ‘yes’ and so his despair is the negative from which the contour of its opposite can be drawn”¹ — as Peter Brook characterizes Beckett’s way of speaking about the human condition, in the passage from *The Empty Space*, where he calls it “perhaps the most intense and personal writing of our time”.

The phrase “forging his merciless no”, which reminds me of “the screaming silence of no’s knife in yes’s wound” from the thirteenth *Text for Nothing*, might have been used in the title of this paper if more consideration were given to the ‘no’ part, the problem of negativity, the consequence of Beckett’s “honest vision”, in accord with the attitude : “If nothing is to be reached at the end of the quest, then let it be, I will face it, come what might.” “His merciless no” should therefore be borne in mind while I focus primarily on “forging” in Beckett’s late works, for although we seem to know of what stuff they are made, I suspect that it is the way they are fabricated by Beckett the maker, the concoction of the artifact, that is the principal source of their impact.

In Brook’s opinion, “Beckett’s plays are symbols in an exact sense of the word. A false symbol is soft and vague : a true symbol is hard and clear. When we say ‘symbolic’ we often mean something drearily obscure : a true symbol is specific, it is the only form a certain truth can take.”²

What we witness when the curtain opens on Beckett’s *Rockaby* is of the hardness and clarity Brook speaks about. A woman dressed in black is sitting in a rocking chair placed in the only part of the stage which is not shrouded with darkness. The woman, alone, says only one line, “More”, four times, each time provoking a voice from offstage to resound, the chair to rock, and the light to dim, until the four (woman, voice, chair, light) reach the stasis of the final slow fade out. The voice is recorded and, as we read in stage directions, is her own, but speaks in the third person, and in the past tense. In the four parts of the narrated story certain repeated phrases are supplemented with new details. It is only in the last section that we become aware of the relevance of the story to the stage situation, just about time when we hear the final lines : “stop her eyes / fuck life / rock her off.” The play is about renouncing life and welcoming death, in the last, and I think also the first,

¹ Peter Brooks, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 65.

² op. cit. p. 64-65

moment of lucidity. In an unseen voice addressed both to the woman onstage and to the rocking chair, (“rock her off!”), the life of a woman is renounced. But which woman? On the stage? From the story? And what is their relationship? And then, we can ask : Is it her own future that she envisions on stage, or is it her past that comes back to her in the purgatory of the mind? Or perhaps it is the way she envisions the future when it has become the past. Speaking of *Not I*, Beckett has been reported saying : “I am not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I hope the piece would work on the necessary emotions of the audience rather than appealing to their intellect.”³ In *Rockaby*, the audience are primarily under emotional impact of what is being witness on stage, exposed to the “hard and clear” of the intriguing image and the mysterious progression of the play’s visual and aural components. Some people, however, cannot help but, enticed by the play’s indeterminacies, begin to ponder mutual relationship of the elements of the play as well as their reference to the world outside. For these, the time of active participation begins, of deciphering the play’s ambiguities, which may be the only kind of *Mitspiel* which Beckett foresaw for the audience. The play begins as a single simple image but as we reflect on the repercussions it grows more and more complicated to become a locus of multiple meanings.

When the woman with the arms of the chair around her repeats her lines : “when she said / to herself / whom else”, I for my part recall the words repeated in another late play, *That Time*, where one of the three voices speaks of past solitudes : “with your arms around you whose else hugging you for a bit of warmth”, and I cannot help but associate it with the arms of the chair in *Rockaby*, trying to imagine how these can hug her. In *That Time* the image was a substitute for the warmth of a human embrace. Here, in *Rockaby*, this grip of the chair is at the same time reminiscent of birth (as the figure of mother is) and the anticipation of death, since the chair is to rock her off life. In the place of arms associated with human warmth and solitude in *That Time*, the final “Those arms at last” in *Rockaby* refers to death, as does rocking (which formerly is associated with mother and birth). Life is a repeated rhythmical “come and go”, before the cycle closes and it turns into The Come and Go, birth and death, with a rhythmical chasm between. The title *Rockaby* is taken from a somewhat macabre lullaby ending with a cradle falling from the tree-top, complete with “baby” and “all”. The French title is even more telling. “Berceuse” means, firstly, a rocking chair — which is what we see on stage — or a cradle (which alludes to birth, as the movement of rocking alludes to fetal life), secondly a cradle song, something meant to help put someone to sleep, to restore to peace and calm (which in this case gives the promise of the final peace), a lullaby (which resembles the verses we hear from the tape off stage, and thirdly a female who rocks a cradle (which is in a way whom we see on stage and about whom we are told in the recorded text).

³ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), p. 625.

Rockaby provides an extremely cumulative image, as most of Beckett's late works. These fascinating texts at each new encounter reveal new associations, hitherto unnoticed by us. The process of discovering analogies, once set in motion, never seems to end. Paradoxically or not, as Beckett's texts become more austere and purified, stripped of (most of) external impedimenta so as to become almost abstract, when examined closely, they reveal more and more meaning — if we care to look into it. His work underwent a process of contraction, not reduction ; minimal on the surface, they contain enormous "energy" inside.

It is instructive to go back to his early texts while we ponder what seems very enigmatic in the late texts. In both cases certain images, motifs, phrases and words occur over and over again. We get to know Beckett gradually, by mapping out his contexts, becoming more competent the more we read, and the more we compare his early and later texts. One gets used to Beckett's own code of meaning, to his specific emotional signification of places, gestures, observations, to his Proustian valorization of the external world, according to the individual's own symbolic code. Thus, an otherwise neutral event acquires added signification, becoming what we might call a prop of existence.

In his early work, where he still describes the outside world, he looks at it with the attentiveness of a game bird in search of prey. Compelled to ask questions about the core of life invariably seen from the point of view of death, he finds in the observed world what he is looking for in it. So, while observing the reality without, he reads death out of everything.

To illustrate it, let's take Beckett's sometimes idiosyncratic preoccupation with his hero's attire. From the many detailed descriptions of how his figures are dressed we can derive an idea of what connotations clothing can have for him. The attire is tripartite, and more often than not comprises hat, shoes and long coat covering the rest of the body. It is allusive of birth, life, and death. The head, mostly capped or hatted, brings reminiscences of the past, and is suggestive of birth ("Murphy never wore a hat, the memories it awoke of the caul, were too poignant, especially when he had to take it off", we read in *Murphy*, and recall the hat business in *En Attendant Godot*. The shoes, often either too small, or too big, are functional, in the sense that they make the present, life, the (walking) life, what it is : painful. The coat, heavy and obscuring the shape of the body can be seen as the anticipation of death (shroud). But these values are by no means fixed and stable. As in *Finnegans Wake*, the associative process, once started, never stops, and includes the generating of opposite notations. Because of the linkage between womb and grave, the coat also represents birth (swaddling clothes), and the hat death.

Or let us take a familiar image : an instant of the sudden bright sun at the end of a rainy day, a motif which Beckett uses repeatedly on numerous occasions, always with vague but unmistakable reference to "life as such". It is not an uncommon sight in Ireland, and it had accompanied the young Beckett often enough before it assumed this fixed connotation of having something to do with life and death.

In Beckett, every detail of the surroundings can evoke the life-death dilemma. Every sign of life is a premonition of death, every simple object can serve as a “memento mori”. So the bright sun before it gets dark “means” brevity, or perhaps : a short flash of lucid awareness before death comes. Or is it like Pozzo’s “They are giving birth astride a grave”. Beckett never states it directly, or uses it as a clear simile, but instead leaves it as a subtle suggestion, subtle but too strong to be ignored. His works are full of such images, as his Dublin life was full of daily occurrences and sights which he interpreted in the (sombre) light of his preoccupation with “the issueless predicament of existence.”

From the ordinary, Beckett extricates its intrinsic trait and bestows upon it the significance of the universal. Dante had perhaps the longest lasting influence on him. In some way his late images are made of the same stuff as Dante’s, high and concrete, and illustrating the thesis that each individual partakes in universal order and that in the fate of concrete people the working of the cosmos is reflected. The tangibility of images which, transplanted into a different context, signal issues that by far transcend their “secular” meaning also reminds us of Dante. The *modus existientiae* of the dreamy figures from Beckett’s late visionary pieces, both in prose and drama, can be compared to that of Dante, with their celebratory, ritualistic nature, their solemnity, their obsession with a few particular aspects of their worldly existence which they refer to over and over again, revolving it all in their heads.

This authenticity of detail, *and* Beckett’s relating it to the metaphysical sphere, account for our fascination with his works which appeal not only to those capable of going (and willing to do it) through erudite allusions and stratifications of “repressed knowledge”, but to everyone who is prepared to concentrate on the most solid, most universal, almost anthropologically valid facets of his work. This is quite obvious with regard to such works as *Waiting for Godot* through *Happy Days* in drama, and most of his early works through *How it is* in prose.

Texts which came afterwards are much more enigmatic and, while being straightforward, also more complex. At the same time they create the need for a more extensive interpretation than their material offers the basis for and frustrate it because of their enigmatic character. The viewer or reader is impressed with the directness of their impact and aware of their themes and poetics, but inevitably ends up facing the inexplicable. While the “classical” works provoke the audience or readers to fill up their “open” enigmas (who is Godot, is *Endgame* about the last humans on earth?), the polished surface of Beckett’s late works reflects only the reader’s / viewer’s curiosity or helplessness.

2.

Despite the changing poetics, the source of Beckett’s work remained heroically unchanged, his main issue being “the issueless predicament of existence” : the dilemma of life and death as thought, pictured, remembered,

examined by a solitary hero in the introspective act of his / her consciousness turning to itself.

Already in his earliest works Beckett sought to find literary means to present such mental reality. We find it confirmed in numerous passages from his early novel unpublished during his lifetime, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, as in the following : “The mind, dim and hushed like a sick-room, like a chapelle ardente, thronged with shades ; the mind at last its own asylum [...] ; the mind suddenly reprieved, ceasing to be an annex of the restless body, the glare of understanding switched off. The lids of the hard aching mind close, there is suddenly gloom in the mind ; not sleep, not yet, nor dream, with its sweats and terrors, but a waking ultra-cerebral obscurity, thronged with grey angels ; there is nothing of him left but the umbra of grave and womb where it is fitting that the spirits of his dead and his unborn should come abroad. [...]... in the umbra, the tunnel, when the mind went wombtomb, then it was real thought and real living. [...] In the tunnel he was a grave paroxysm of gratuitous thoughts, his thoughts, free and unprofessional, [...] living as only spirits are free to live.” (typescript at Reading, pp. 38-40)

The microcosm of the artist’s mind is conveyed by words in the images of the skull, the mind going wombtomb, the tunnel, the lids of the mind, the glare of understanding, the umbra of grave and womb. All these words are linked to space. The mind *must* feed on images taken from the external world. What it finds when it looks into itself has to bear relation to the reality without. It cannot do away with outside objects ; it can only limit their number, play with their arrangement, neutralize their action. The picture is flawed by the referential relation to the world. The sparser, purer, less dependent it is, the more it threatens to become empty and blank and to dissipate.

Murphy’s sixth chapter is another superb attempt at description of the mind as locum, in spatial terms, all the more so that it appears in the framework of the world external and heterogeneous to Murphy’s mind — the world of “big blooming buzzing confusion”.

The French prose of the forties, in this respect, brings about an important change in perspective, for it elevates the consciousness of the speaker (whoever the speaking agency might be) and treats it as the location where only occasionally the distant noise of the big world can be heard amidst the mind’s lucid agitation.

The fictional world in the novel *L’Innommable*, even if it evokes objects, does defy notions of causality, referentiality of time and space, and is capable of circumventing corporeality — because, by the virtue of its indeterminacy, the language, however imperfect, seems a better match for consciousness than the body. Mental space can be created in prose texts without their needing to subvert their own principles. But how can the sphere of individual consciousness serve as material on stage? How can something experienced by us in private which our language renders in a variety of space metaphors that denote its interior character (insideness) and stress immateriality be represented in a public spectacle that seems to involve the opposite :

externality and material presence? And, above all, how can the fullness of bodily presence be withdrawn from the corporeal entity on stage called the actor without forfeiting the chance to present movement in the mind? The “ultra-cerebral obscurity” which was a feature of Belacqua’s mind cannot be filled with “the dead and unborn” but with living human beings.

Theatre, compared to prose, in this respect, at first meant for Beckett a step back, for Vladimir, Hamm, Krapp, even Winnie *can* be taken by the audience as real persons acting onstage (true, only in the most direct perceptions), the stage being reduced to a mimetic space with symbolic overtones. Over time, however, following his intuition and experience with theatre, Beckett wrote a series of plays which, while leaving virtually no possibility of mimetic reception, seemed to have proven that mental space *can* be attempted in the theatre. When converted to theatrical space, it opens up new possibilities of immediacy and directness that can make the viewer dramatically aware of sharing an introverted act of mind. This can be done by using material objects in such a way as to indicate relations rather than substance and by stripping the material objects of certain conventional connotations. Materiality can then be shown as self-erasing. And the works can be instrumentalized, according to a new pattern.

The status of what the actor represents changed considerably between *Waiting for Godot* and *What Where*, with the turning point coming after *Krapp’s Last Tape*, in the early 1960’s. Winnie from *Happy Days* and perhaps Joe from *Eh Joe* are the last pretexts for *verismo*. From then on, as one critic has put it, “Individual consciousness becomes the arena for actions.”⁴

What took on stage over a decade was accomplished within a few years in another medium, radio drama, a genre to which Beckett turned rather by accident and which he explored but for a short time. In my view, his experience with radio put him on a hitherto not envisioned path. In less than five years he produced a small number of pieces for radio, none of which is normally mentioned in the same breath as his most notable achievements. The first, *All That Fall*, is a quasi-realistic play written for many characters at a supposedly specific location in the Greater Dublin area and set in the era of Beckett’s childhood. The second one, *Embers*, presents the lonely protagonist telling himself stories and evoking voices. In the third piece, *Words and Music*,² somewhat allegorical figures, one of them being music, contribute to the birth of a poem out of the spirit of music. In the latest radio play (*Cascando*), a kind of performing machine generates a verbal text counterpointed with music. *Milieu* and individuality of the actors are at degree zero — the situation it took Beckett a decade longer to achieve on stage.

Radio made Beckett realize that inherent but potential dramatism of consciousness (as we know it from *The Trilogy*) can be turned into performance, that language *can speak*, that voices, in all their sensuous concreteness and immediacy, yet not bound to a body, *do appear* on stage

⁴ Charles Lyons, *Samuel Beckett* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983), p. 165.

inasmuch as they *can be heard*, and finally, that the category of the character can be disposed of in drama. Having freed his work in the domain of the acoustic from the last fetters of the much despised subjugation to mimesis and realism, his next logical step would be to add *the withdrawn visual image* to the voices and silences, to restore vision. Which, however, does not mean the embodied character. For Beckett does not return to the conventional concept of the actor, corporeally present on stage, as the centre and the unifying factor of all that happens on stage, where speech and bodily appearance are linked in a conventional, “organic” way to create a character. Instead, the organizing principle seems now the juxtaposing of two modes : visual and acoustic, over the head of the actor so to speak, according to the elaborate pattern that has more to do with music and arts than with drama.

3.

Beckett was always interested in the musicality of texts in general, rhythm of speech, articulation of words. One is struck by how often in his early prose he describes at length the eccentric way his protagonists speak. That the expressive quality of the human voice was very important to him later is confirmed by the fact that a particular actor’s voice often inspired him to write new texts, as in the case of Patrick Magee, David Warrilow and Billie Whitelaw. From the time of writing the radio works on, his interest in the aural took on the form of specific experiments which touched more directly on the acoustic and performing aspects. Firstly, more than before, Beckett became interested in the non-verbal use of music and sounds. Secondly, his concern with the materiality of vocal articulation was expressed in experimenting with specific articulatory processes, especially with continuity and discontinuity of the flow of words. Thirdly, he resorted to the use of electronic recording and reproduction as an essential device in stage plays. Its thematic value is obvious : to signal repetitiveness, memory, inner dialogue, and reinforce dialectics of mutually definable notions like : the dead vs. the alive, present vs. absent, interior vs. exterior.

In Beckett’s case, the scholastic mind merges with a pragmatic attitude towards technique. As in music, precision balances spontaneity, emotions find their highly formalized expression beyond the mimetic.

Speaking more specifically about music in the wider context of Beckett’s interest in the aural, he treated it as the unsurpassed ideal of an art which disposes with ‘mimesis’. It is in this spirit that he expresses himself in 1937 in a letter to his German acquaintance Axel Kaun, from which I’ll quote in the original : “Soll die Literatur auf jenem alten faulen, von Musik und Malerei laengst verlassenem Wege, allein hinterbleiben? Steckt etwas lähmend Heiliges in der Unnatur des Wortes, was zu den Elementen der anderen Künste nicht gehört? Gibt es irgendeinen Grund, warum jene fürchterlich willkürliche Materialität der Wortfläche nicht aufgelöst werden sollte, wie

z.B. die von großen schwarzen Pausen gefressene Tonfläche in der siebten Symphonie von Beethoven...”⁵

4.

“The visual” has played an equally important role with Beckett. However, I’ll just touch on two aspects. Firstly, he often employed “a painter’s perspective” when describing his fictional world. His emblematic use of posture is not a late invention ; it was even more prominent in the earlier works because of its ironic exaggeration. Some descriptions of Murphy and the positions of his body would be worth a study in iconography and iconology in the guise of art historian Erwin Panofsky. Certain techniques of description of Murphy’s body or certain passages from *Watt* sound like a description of a painting.

Secondly, one remark on Beckett’s art criticism. A whole body of his writings on contemporary painting, published mostly in the forties is extremely relevant to his own aesthetics. The concept of Beckett’s late works seem to be directly influenced by the conclusions at which he arrived then. It is the fate of the painter that best illustrates the dilemma of the artist facing the existential.

Thus, a propos of the painting of Bram van Velde, he once more resuscitates the image of the skull as the source, place and object of vision : «La chose immobile dans le vide, voilà enfin la chose visible, l’objet pur. [...] La boîte crânienne a le monopole de cet article. [...] C’est là qu’on commence enfin à voir, dans le noir. Dans le noir qui ne craint pas aucune aube. Dans le noir qui est aube et midi et soir et nuit d’un ciel vide, d’une terre fixe. Dans le noir qui éclaire l’esprit.»⁶ And about Jack B. Yeats’ painting Beckett states : “He is with the great of our time, Kandinsky and Kale, Balmier and Bram van Velde, Rouault and Braque, because he brings light, as only the great dare to bring light, to the issueless predicament of existence, reduces the dark where there might have been, mathematically at least, a door.”⁷

Beckett’s liaison with the arts can be linked to his strong need to do away with mimesis, something which he found had already been accomplished in the works of his artist-friends where technique was used to defy representation. It was with the help of art and music that Beckett’s theatre was trying to find the end of representation. Hence, the analysis of his attitude towards painting helps us understand the premises of his art. The making of the Beckettian form always involves certain operations that have more to do with visual arts and music than theatrical convention. The standards of precision imposed by his works can only be reached in the field of music and visual arts.

5.

All of Beckett’s late theatre seems to me an experiment in orchestrating the visual with the acoustic in a way which has nothing to do with the traditional

⁵ *Disjecta*, ed; by Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), p. 53.

⁶ *Disjecta*, p. 126.

⁷ *Disjecta*, p. 97.

interaction of these two elements in a dramatic work and which invites much more “formalistic” analysis of what actually takes place on stage, before we proceed to speak about the ideas. What other plays require analysis in the manner of the following excerpt from a commentary on *Happy Days* : “This sixth pause is the thirteenth thing that happens in the play, and it is the end of the first full completed action “beat”. Event number ten was the only verbal utterance so far, the first “line” of the play-text?”⁸

The play turns into a spectacle of hearing and seeing, measured by a sequence of visual and aural signals that interact, join and split, mirror each other, showing harmony and disharmony. The stage is where the voice appears, recorded or live, and where it is posed against another voice, embodied or not, and set against the setting where there is a human body which can obey or challenge the voice and where the possible expressions of the face, gestures and movements of the body and sound of speech or music are set against changes and modulation of lighting.

Martin Esslin claims that the metaphor in which Beckett presents the existential experience becomes progressively visual, and that in works like *Quad* and *Nacht und Traume* the purely visual images are totally free from word⁹. I agree that they are freed from word, yet they are not purely visual, for in both works the aural plays an important role. They are inconceivable without music and sound, *Quad* is a TV “play for four players, light and percussion”, *Nacht und Traume* cannot dispose of “the last 7 bars of Schubert’s *Lied*.”

Most of the late plays develop according to a complicated, laboriously structured pattern and seem to fit — roughly — to one of the two major types, which I will call the Listening and the Talking type. In the Listening type, there is an unembodied voice and we watch how it influences the situation onstage. Plays of this category vary from a simple “speech act” performed on the hearer (as in *That Time*) to a sequence of repetitive stage movements dictated by the unseen voice (as in *Ghost Trio* or *What Where*). The spectator can see how the voice influences the figure. The figure can be a body or a part of the body. It is in this type that fragmentation of the bodies occurs.

Other plays, which we may call the Talking type, develop without the unseen voice, and the complete body is capable of moving. They are characterized by a less conspicuous — or rather, less arithmetic — repetitiveness (as *A Piece of Monologue* and *Ohio Impromptu*). Yet they also deny the audience the satisfaction of the simple figuring-it-all-out, for not only are the figures enigmatic to the extreme but what is performed stands in an equivocal relationship to what is said. There is a narrating element, a verbal story-telling which is somewhat related to the situation of the protagonist, but the author

⁸ Robert Scanlan, “Mimesis Praxeos in the Works of Samuel Beckett”, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, New series, vol. 1, n° 1/2 (Spring 1992) p. 7.

⁹ Martin Esslin, «Une Poésie d’images mouvantes», in *Revue d’Esthétique*, numéro spécial hors série 1986, p. 392.

frustrates all our efforts either to dismiss the story as irrelevant to the setting or to identify the verbal narrative with the stage sequence.

Thus the evoked space of the story, or the evoked space where the disembodied voice originates, is counter-pointed with the seen-and-heard space of the situation onstage.

This seen-and-heard space may lead us to a spatial concretization *beyond* the stage: to the area offstage, the dark abode of directors and instructors. Curiously, offstage was often employed in Beckett's earlier drama. Pozzo and Lucky and the boy appear *from there*, and Vladimir goes there to do his painful business, Clov walks to and from his kitchen, Krapp dives "backstage into darkness" to drink and get his *aidememoires*: "an old ledger" and "an enormous dictionary". But it is only from *Play* onward that off-stage virtually enters into a dialogue with the stage proper. It encloses and envelops the front stage, threatens with its darkness to intrude on the figures.

Unless we insist on some hypostatized "outer world" from which the word — or the sound — comes, we may see in this dark zone the space of the missing *supplement*; who knows, perhaps even the space of the transcendent, the unconscious, the holy, the area of significance.

So, to define the terms: theatrical space comprises the stage as setting (onstage) as well as what is behind, unseen yet presumed to exist (offstage). The setting, though it accommodates actors' bodies in their whole (transitory) immediacy, does not account for the person long sought after, namely the Beckettian "I", which is being made absent by the action of the actors onstage. These, the actants or performers, are engaged in activities in which they are tools in the hands of the instance sought for behind. As to the performer, his or her acting never leads to creating a character. True, in most cases the body is there, whole or in part, and the phenomena associated with functions of the body can be observed. Somewhat paradoxically, in Beckett's evolution, as the body aspires to become an autonomous stage object, it becomes almost lifeless.

Body-mind antagonism loses its sharpness as the Beckettian body loses its secretions, No blood, sweat and tears can be expected in the late works. The bodies are *thought out* by the dreaming persona behind, virtually becoming mental *objects* brought to existence by the subject behind. The bodies are dreamed out, thought out only to appear as such, immediate to the audience; this immediacy, however, being but a mark of absence. The empty presence signals only the absence. A Beckett play conveys a profound sense of immediacy, generated in the act of a highly concentrated MENTAL VISION that evokes bodies.

The Beckettian figure is an icon, a bodily frame to *signal human presence*, the external form, not a *person* sustained in drama but an emblem of an assumed person behind, the Beckettian *persona*, the figure of identity, of the missing "I" conspicuously absent by contrast to the corporeal figure of the actor.

If in Beckett's drama the whole stage microcosm stands for an individual consciousness, then the primary vehicle for the consciousness is the Text

understood as the totality of semantic elements of the play in their temporary progression.

The consciousness is a screen where images appear perceived by the inner eye or ear. Or it is a stage where the voice reverberates in silence in the presence of the visual image sharply delineated by light surrounded by darkness. The stage is a womb which bears the image (frequently images of birth and death) before it is eaten up by the dark. The stage is also a matrix of thoughts generating visions that involve body, thoughts yearning to be rid of the remnants of the body and the memory of it.

6.

In his late plays, Beckett abandoned most of the dramatic support of a theatrical production, leaving only a few physical resources indispensable for an act of performing. On the other hand, theatricality, if not dramatism, remains a great potential of the late prose.

As to the theme, there is a common pattern in both late prose and drama — to put it rather simply, we have to do with a process of intertwining elements pertaining to memory and imagination. In both genres, relations between *personae* and the author are no sooner established (or rather : suggested) than they are obscured by doubts and incertitudes. Once a freshly perceived vision of the past, it now becomes a manifestation of a repetitive and repeated ritual — performed directly on stage or depicted in prose. In order to give the relief, it needs to be articulated and repeated.

Performing a Beckett text lends it a full dimension which is overlooked in the reading. It makes it possible for the text to have a direct impact on the reader, and not only because it comes in the fullness of articulation (superb masters of voice like Warrilow or Magee have taught us not only how to remember these texts, but also how to understand them in the light of their articulation). The impact is all the greater because we are forced to take the text without interruption. As I have mentioned, Beckett often preferred the physical impact of the unmediated voice over, and even at the expense of, intelligibility.

We know that Beckett himself wanted to keep the genres separate and that he opposed a great many projects of staging his prose or radio plays. But fortunately, his was, above all, a pragmatic mind, and not only did he give permission to adopt his prose but occasionally engaged himself in transferring his work into another genre (e.g. the German TV version of *What Where*).

Let us take the example of *A Piece of Monologue*, the text of which was included in his volume of *Plays*. Among these, it seems strikingly undramatic. Martin Esslin calls it «...cet hybride étrange d'un récit et d'une pièce dramatique». Its static stage business vaguely (and only in part) doubles — or should one rather say follows — the words (story line of the narrative). Those familiar with the manuscripts at Reading University know that *A Piece of Monologue* literally was born of the (textual) body of *Company* — a prose work. That *Company* can be staged with theatrical effectiveness no lesser than that of *A Piece of Monologue* has been proven by Pierre Chabert's and Stanley

Gontarski's adaptations. The situation described in *Company* shows great affinity with *That Time*, a dramatic work which stages the concept of a voice from the past coming to one in the dark, which is what *Company* is about. Speaking of *That Time*, Beckett has remarked that it was on the edge of what is possible in the theatre.

A good staging of *That Time* and *A Piece of Monologue* makes for a profound theatrical experience in the same way watching *the text* of *Company* performed does. On the other hand, doing *A Piece of Monologue* without the stage business is entirely possible. Indeed, David Warrilow, on a variety of occasions "merely read the text".

In fact, the play *A Piece of Monologue* is Beckett's own adaptation of a text that had been written as prose and later shaped to fit the stage needs of Warrilow. And Beckett shows here how to "adapt" prose for stage — he makes it performable in a relatively simple way. His method in this case is not to recreate the dramatic within the prose, not to create the stage situation out of the narrative, but rather to add a new dimension : to place the prose text within the co-ordinates of the stage. He *supplements* the text with a specific stage situation. This situation bears a resemblance to the one described in the text, a resemblance that cannot be ignored. Yet, what we see on stage does not simply illustrate the scenes from the narrative. The two — stage business and the generated text — remain in a contrapuntal relation.

The impact of a well-produced *Piece of Monologue* proves that theatricality does not have to go hand in hand with dramatism. In fact, in my view, a non-dramatic work by Beckett, when carefully presented, becomes a theatrical event without having to show a single dramatic occurrence.

David Warrilow, in his account of staging *A Piece of Monologue*, gives us an interesting example of the opacity of the spoken word that results in the eclipse of the visual. "Dans *Solo*, j'ai essayé [...] d'avoir un autre aperçu de ce qui est familier, de parler de langue comme si je la découvrais pour la première fois. J'ai voulu que mon visage soit caché pour que le public puisse savourer les mots. J'ai cherché à apporter le plus de précision possible à la diction..."¹⁰

"La diction". Here's another example of freeing what is usually one aspect of performance, and almost elevating it to the status of a stage person of its own. Unlike *Not I* or *That Time*, where we see only the speaking mouth or listening face, this time we see the whole body save face and mouth. And the word virtually *takes place*, as in this one sentence in *A Piece of Monologue* : "Parts lips and thrusts tongue forward. Birth", where the articulation of the word "birth" reflects the process of birth, thus equating *dictio* with action.

The above sentence is perhaps the most striking image of *A Piece of Monologue*, and one that to Beckett's regret was only possible in English, being omitted in the French text. A few associations I have on its subject should help us realize the level of "semiotic compression" characteristic of

¹⁰ David Warrilow, «La Musique, pas le sens», in *Revue d'Esthétique*, the said issue, p. 252.

late Beckett. Firstly, the metonymic substitution of the womb by the mouth makes one associate giving birth with verbal delivery. Secondly, the image of the lighted spill, juxtaposed with the articulating of the word, both of which “part the dark”, joins together the articulated word, the body, and the darkness and light of the space, all of them both on stage and in the story. Thirdly, the juxtaposing of the voiced articulation and the phenomenon of birth, beginning of life, leads us to “In the beginning was the Word”, as well as the following verses of St. John which show affinity with Beckett’s themes of : *life, light and darkness*. As elsewhere in Beckett, the religious associations are vague here, yet clear enough. Fourthly, the ‘th’, tongue between teeth, which is characteristic of the articulation of the word “birth”, is also characteristic of that of “death”. As we remember, the first sentence of the play is “birth was the death of him”. Moreover, we witness, especially when the text is staged, a complex intertwining of the visual with the aural : an acoustic phenomenon (the sound of ‘th’) is presented in visual terms (position of the speech organ, tongue between teeth), which is conveyed in the speech we *hear* in the theatre, which is delivered by an actor we *see* on stage.

I won’t dwell on other associations, nor try to pose further questions concerning the identity of the figure on stage and the relationship of his story to himself or “yet another”. An American critic, Charles Lyons, says that if we want to understand Beckett’s theatre, we should analyze the implied poetics of his works, look into how their internal structure generates a network of meanings, and try to describe the complex interaction of *potentially* significant elements in the plays as they are perceived and explained by a *hypothetical* reader.¹¹ While it is true that the actual reader is moved by the poetry of what he notices on stage rather than by Beckett’s literary strategies aimed at ambiguity, any critical inquiry into Beckett proves that plays like *Rockaby* or *A Piece of Monologue* are a much less stable affair than the simplicity of their images may suggest. The play, as it develops in all the complexity of auditory and visual images juxtaposed with the text, generates The Text, which becomes a source of associations and meanings with no end-point in sight. As I tried to show, while commenting on *Rockaby*, the sprawling web of associations goes beyond one work to include the entire Beckett canon, and then of course also the cultural context into which Beckett’s work is written.

Rather than look for a central concept firmly attached to a particular signifier, one can demonstrate how a work becomes a spin-off of a potentially endless play of signifiers. Meaning is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers. I am using the de Saussurean distinction here in order to draw a parallel between the critic approaching Beckett’s work and the post-structuralist viewing the sign.

Beckett’s play, with its mosaic of the aural and the visual, seems a complex unity of meaningful elements, each of which sends those viewers looking for

¹¹ Charles Lyons, *Samuel Beckett*, op. cit. See also my review of Lyons’ book in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, n° 11-12, pp. 185-188.

transcendental meaning only to the next element which, in turn, refers to the next one, each distancing itself from and identifying itself with another. Those who come to the late Beckett attracted by his modernist roots are denied *the final word* and have to content themselves with this continual flickering, spilling and defusing of meaning which Derrida calls “dissemination”. However, in the last instance it turns out precisely the way their maker meant them to be : a translucent window onto their *source* and *object*, the mind. Enoch Brater calls a play of the *Rockaby* type “a performance poem”¹². Others may deem it possible that in these dense, austere plays an entirely new notion of theatricality is proposed, based on a similar *Aufhebung* of the mimetic in drama as that which has already taken place in modern music and the visual arts. Whether this formula applies only to his writing or to the direction drama will eventually take, remains to be seen. In order to solve his all-time dilemma of how to present the inner reality, Beckett subverts and deconstructs the principles and categories of dramatic convention such as character, dialogue, spatio-temporal referentiality, plot, action, not by dispensing with them but by sowing dramatic disunity, bringing the system out of balance. Beckett dissociates the elements that drama is supposed to put together and proposes another kind of “synthesis”, where visual and aural images are orchestrated in a highly formalized way reminiscent of the practices of the visual arts and music.

¹² *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's late style in the theater* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).