

Crítica

The Materialization of Absence: Beckett's Neural Theatre

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In Betweenness

In his assessment of French cineaste Jean-Luc Godard, Deleuze stresses the in-betweenness of Godard's work, between sound and vision, between television and cinema, between image and text. This is Deleuze's critique of postwar cinema as a 'time image', which offers the perspective of a disinterested, bodiless perceiver and which at its best presents the pure flow of time, becoming. Such in-betweenness admittedly owes much to Bergson's *durée*, and whose formulation of the image, which Deleuze essentially follows, is something between matter and memory, presence and absence, as much material as immanence, the material spiritualized; the spirit materialized, the image both and wholly neither. As Deleuze reminds us in his essay on Beckett's teleplays, 'The Exhausted', the image is neither representation nor thing, but a process, a constant becoming, which, as it creates affect is the ultimate impact of art, not only in cinema, that is, but in other arts as well (Deleuze 1995: 19). Such process, an emphasis on flow and becoming, a perpetual in-betweenness – between text and image, between past and present, between sensation and matter – suggests an incipient theory of theatre as well. Certainly such is the case in Beckett's work, particularly his late work for theatre and media in which we find a preponderance of spectral figures, ghosts, absences, what Deleuze calls the 'ghostly dimension' (14). What appears on stage as a something, a material object, a body, perhaps, or body part, is not always fully present, something not quite wholly material, nor quite simply immaterial or ethereal either, something in between presence and absence, sound and image, or matter and image, between the real and surreal, Beckett himself an artist in between, neither wholly of his time nor wholly of ours, say, fully neither, even as he is always, if partly, both. The pacing *May of Footfalls* is a case in point: apparently a physical entity on stage, or at least we perceive an image in motion, she may not be there at all, or not fully there as the final short scene of the stage without her figure suggests. Spirit thus becomes light, perhaps a beam of light as the final image of the play suggests and as the assailing voice of *Eh, Joe* would have it. Beckett's theatre is thus not about something, not a representation, the image or images of the artistic creation not images of something outside the work; they are 'that something itself', as he famously quipped in 1929 in reference to James Joyce's then-titled 'Work in Progress'. 'The identification of the immediate with the past experience, the recurrence of past action or reaction in the present, amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance' (55).

In 'Ohio Impromptu' two figures seated at a table are 'As alike in appearance as possible' (1986,445), as the text reminds us. At very least they look to be materially equal entities, two physically present bodies. And yet the narrative or memoir read by the figure

functionally called Reader suggests otherwise, one a spiritual representative of an absent one, a former lover. If we assume some continuity, some congruence between the visual image and the narrated images, a self reflexivity to the performance, say, or an embodiment of the narrative, that is, theatre as illustrative of a text, then one of the perceived figures on the stage, and perhaps the one apparently controlling the reading, the one called Listener, is a material presence, one an emissary, a shade, a spirit sent by the absent lover for something like consolation, 'my shade will comfort you', may not be. Our perception then may be faulty, the stage image 'ill seen' since at least one of the figures may not be there – at least not as a material presence. Something of a dream may be suggested here as indicated in the narrative in the third person, 'in his dreams ...'; but reading the work as dream does not necessarily solve the issues of presence and absence, the material and the immaterial. Moreover, the narrative suggests something of the fluidity of being as the image of the Seine divided by the Isle of Swans is reunited on the far side of the Isle, and so finally, 'grew to be as one'. Is this merging, this reunion, that of the lovers of the narrative, or of the two figures we believe we perceive on stage, one apparently material, one not, or the merger of dream and reality? But each of these possibilities is complicated, made problematic, say, as the narrative is both materialized and deterritorialized. We might add that a third active entity is present in performance, the text itself, at least some forty pages long, on stage, taking on a life, shaping our response to the performance and so to the central, thematic, philosophical issues. Text itself, we might say, our third player in the performance, is a link, a bridge, between the lovers, between Reader and Listener, between the real and the unreal, or the real and the virtual, between materiality and imagination, or memory, thus linking past with present, giving spirit or shade a material form and simultaneously questioning materiality itself since both figures may be dream images, or versions of the same figure as 'they grew to be as one', at which point, 'nothing is left to tell'. But such a phrase, the 'nothing' left 'to tell', is already written, already in the text at the telling, and thus a repetition. Text, as text, has presumably been thought and read before, and will doubtless be read again, the imaginative image or memory (and they amount to the same) that we as audience perceive will be repeated, with difference, over and over again, the 'Impromptu' not a telos, but a loop, a repetition, always with difference, and a bridge between the material and the immaterial, between presence and absence, the engagement not between figure and figure but between figure(s) and text, text already written.

Beckett's move into television re-emphasized the imagistic nature of performance with bodiless narrators' voices near or contrary to those images we see on the screen, the process offering further narrative dislocations. In Beckett's 1985 television version of the play *What Where*, a disembodied narrator tells us, for instance, that 'This is Bam (1999 409), Bam as character is thus already an object other than the narrating voice, who apparently is himself plural already, a multiplicity. 'We are the last five' (1986 470), he Voice continues, the grammar sliding from singular, Bam, to the multiple, a voice that is a 'We'. At best, however, images of four characters appear, Bam, Bim, Bom and Bem, the mysterious fifth, apparently 'Bum' if we follow the vowel sequence, only incipient or already dispatched. 'In the present as were we still', the voice continues, the subjunctive

tense alerting us to the fact that this statement is contrary to fact. These are characters not there, the pattern of images coming and going, moving to and fro, to an off stage fraught with possibility, to receive 'the works,' Beckett already anticipating such in betweenness in his *Proust*: 'But he is not there because she does not know he is there. He is present at his own absence' (15).

Such images with their narrative and visual disjunctions disrupt expected continuity and are part of or offer insight into the pure flow of time, what Deleuze calls the Plane of Immanence, perceptions always on the verge of becoming, that is, becoming other, something else, unsettling the received, that which we expect; they are thus a material bridge that generates affect, an emotional response not always specified or describable. The classical artist assumes an omnipotence and 'raises himself artificially out of Time in order to give relief to his chronology and causality to his development,' as Beckett notes in his *Proust* treatise (62). On the other hand, great art, minoritarian art, Deleuze would say, is the pure expression of pure feeling, or as Beckett noted in *Proust*, a 'non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception, before they have been distorted into intelligibility in order to be forced into a chain of cause and effect' (66). Such a non-logical statement of phenomena is difficult to achieve through language, and Beckett recognized that fact: 'At that level you break up words to diminish shame. Painting and music have so much better a chance,' he admitted to Lawrence Harvey (1970 249). Billie Whitelaw describes her performance in *Footfalls* thus: 'Sometimes I felt as if he were a sculptor and I a piece of clay [...]. Sometimes I felt as though I were modelling for a painter or working with a musician. The movements started to feel like dance' (Whitelaw 1996: 144). Beckett's language thus is always a foreign tongue, Hiberno-English in his native land; an outsider's French in his adopted, language at times almost a non-language, sound, music, even pauses. Speaking of his direction of *Fin de partie*, Beckett's French director Roger Blin noted:

he had ideas about the play that made it a little difficult to act. At first, he looked on his play as a kind of musical score. When a word occurred or was repeated, when Hamm called Clov, Clov should always come in the same way every time, like a musical phrase coming from the same instrument with the same volume. I thought that this idea was very much a product of the intellect and would result in an extraordinary rigor. He didn't see any drama or suspense in Clov's imminent departure. He would either leave or he wouldn't. (Blin in Gontarski 2012: 172)

Beckett is thus, like Kafka, as Deleuze characterizes him, always a foreign and so a minoritarian writer.

Neural Theater

Such worlds as Beckett creates are thus virtual worlds that include past and present, material figures, imagination, and memory; off stage or what appears to be empty space is thus a virtual whole, a nothing full of possibilities, including all possible actions and movements. In this regard Beckett's theatre runs contrary to that described by Peter Brook in his famous theatrical treatise, *The Empty Space*; for Beckett the stage is never

empty but full of the potentially possible. For Deleuze, 'Space enjoys potentialities as long as it makes the realization of events possible: it precedes realization, then, and potentiality itself belongs to the possible. But wasn't this equally the case for the image, which already proposed a specific means of exhausting the possible?' (1995: 11). That is, space too is an image and so as material as it is ethereal. The fourth scene of *Footfalls* with its apparently empty stage remains full of interpretive possibilities, for instance, opens those possibilities even further. It is always replete, full of potential meanings and worlds, of all the possibilities that theatre has to offer since it includes the whole of the past as well as the full potential to create new worlds. The space then is always already full; in short, it contains the process of the virtual, part of what Deleuze will call the Plane of Immanence. Beckett's plays then do not represent or realize a world of actuality, a world outside itself, do not represent at all, but offer images that make us feel in their affect the movement of existence, its flow, becoming, *durée*. Possibilities are not closed off by separating inside from outside, matter from spirit, present from past.

What too often frustrates readers or theatre-goers is precisely this resistance to representation that characterizes Beckett's art, since most of us operate on the Plane of Transcendence that produces or alludes to an exterior to the artwork, the world we know and try to represent in art. This is the world of what Beckett calls the classical artist, a world from which he separated himself. For Deleuze the perceiving mind of a doubting Cartesian subject is a piece of ribbon that separates inside from outside. The ribbon itself or a piece of paper, or as Beckett dubs it in *The Unnamable* a membrane or a tympanum vibrating, is in between, neither inside nor out but both in relation to the other, the vibration evading the Plane of Transcendence or a grounding of any sort, ultimate truths, say, that we are driven to obey. The series of plateaus, perhaps 1,000, that Deleuze critiques in the book of that title, is an assault against such groundings, the stability of language included, as is Beckett's art. Transcendence is a human disease that Deleuze calls 'interpretosis', or what the director of *Catastrophe* in the process of creating an image calls 'This craze for explicitation. Every I dotted to death. Little gag. For God's sake!' 'We're not beginning to ... to... mean something', asks Hamm. 'Mean something!' responds Clov, 'You and I mean something? Ah, that's a good one' (1986 108), and they share a communal laugh over the false promise of Transcendence, that they might be part of a greater system, or a greater truth beyond images of themselves in process. The alternative to transcendence is to accept, even to love, simply what is; Deleuze's term like Foucault's is also an ethics, but, after Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, an 'ethics of the *amor fati*', the love of not exactly fate but of what is. One anecdote that Hamm tells has often been cited but less than satisfactorily discussed. The 'madman' that Hamm visits in the asylum is shown the beauty of the exterior, the corn, the herring fleet, from which the madman turns away appalled (CDW 113-4). Hamm's conclusion is that 'He alone had been spared'. Critics may point out the likely reference here to the visionary poet William Blake, but what or how the 'madman' has been spared is seldom parsed. One possibility is that he has been spared preoccupation with a transcendent world, what Deleuze will call the illusion of transcendence, that will close and explain experience. Hamm's 'madman' is thinking 'other', possible, alternative worlds. It may indeed be just those alternative worlds that Hamm keeps asking Clov

to find beyond the shelter, but they are within as well. In Act II of *Waiting for Godot* the issue is put thus: '[*Aphoristic for once.*] We all are born mad.¹ Some remain so' (CDW 75). Perhaps those are the saved, the parallel to the one thief on the cross. Hamm's position is evidently to pull the madman back from the end of the world, a position that would resist or stop the flow of alternatives, becoming, *durée*. Later Hamm concludes the prayer scene with an overt statement about such transcendence, such 'ethics of knowledge'. Of a transcendental reality, God, he says, 'The bastard. He doesn't exist' (1986 119). Perhaps Hamm too has been spared, saved. As a seated figure Hamm is at a decided disadvantage, however. 'It is the most horrible position in which to await death', Deleuze tells us, 'sitting without the force either to rise or to lie down, watching for the signal [*coup*] that will make us draw ourselves up one last time and lie down forever. Seated, you can't recover, you can no longer stir even a memory' (1995: 6).

In "Ohio Impromptu" two figures seated at a table are "As alike in appearance as possible," as the text reminds us. At very least they look to be materially equal entities, two physically present bodies. And yet the narrative or memoir being read by the figure functionally called Reader, suggests otherwise, that one a spiritual representative of an absent one, a former lover. If we assume some continuity, some congruence between the visual image and the narrated images, a self reflexivity to the performance, say, or an embodiment of the narrative, that is, theater as illustrative of a text, then one of the perceived figures on the stage, and perhaps the one apparently controlling the reading, the one called Listener, is a material presence, one as emissary, a shade, a spirit sent by the absent lover for something like consolation, "my shade will comfort you" as the narrative has it, may not be. Our perception as readers and audience then may be faulty since at least one of the figures may not be there—at least not as a material presence. But that is using the text to self-referentially read the performance. Furthermore, something of a dream may be suggested here as indicated in the narrative with its protagonist in the third person, "in his dreams . . .," but dream doesn't not necessarily solve the issues of presence and absence, the material and the immaterial since even dream is imbued with a certain degree of material presence, with tactile, auditory and visual images. Moreover, the narrative suggest something of the fluidity of being as the image of the Seine divided by the Isle of Swans is reunited on the far side of the isle, and so finally its separated elements of segments, "grew to be as one." Is this merging, this reunion, that of the lovers of the narrative, or of the two figures we believe we perceive on stage, one apparently material, one not, or the merger of dream and reality, an issue in much of Beckett's late works, or the union of text and performance. Each of these possibilities of union, however, is complicated, made problematic, say. We might add that a third active entity is present in performance, the text itself, at least some forty pages long, as Reader reminds us, on stage, shaping our response to performance and so to the central thematic, philosophical epistemological, ontological issues. Text itself, we might say, our third player in the performance, is a link, a bridge, between the lovers, between Reader and Listener, between the real and the unreal, or the

1 'All' and 'are' are reversed in the American edition.

real and the virtual, between materiality and imagination, or memory, between text and performance thus linking past with present, giving spirit or “shade” a material form and simultaneously questioning materiality itself since both may be dream figures or images, or versions of the same figure as “they grew to be as one,” at which point, “nothing is left to tell.” But such a phrase, the “nothing” left “to tell,” is already written as it is performed, already in the text at the telling, and thus already a repetition when we hear it first. Text, as text, has thus, presumably, been thought and read before, and will doubtless be read again, the imaginative image or memory (and they amount to the same) we as audience perceive will be repeated, with difference, over and over again, the “Impromptu” not a telos, but a loop, a repetition, a Mobius strip, but repetition always with a difference, and a bridge between the material and the immaterial, between presence and absence, between text and performance, the dramatic or performative engagement not between figure and figure but between figure(s) and text, text already written.

In his dramaticule of 1968 that Beckett designates as images of motion, *Come and Go*, we are denied access to information that would, if disclosed, shut down the process of thinking. Without that knowledge, the process of thinking, the generation of possibilities, alternatives, parallels the flow of movement on stage. Language is not so much devalued among the 128 (or so) words in this playlet since much of it is elegant and poetic, language as part of (and not apart from) an image of flow. Or at the end of Beckett's late masterwork, *Rockaby*, as the ‘recorded voice’ reveals another narrative thread, ‘and rocked / rocked / saying to herself / no / done with that [...]’, we might ask, ‘Done with what’ or ‘saying [what] to herself’ (CDW 442)? What is resisted in such interruption is knowledge that would still such movement and freeze it, and end a process that Deleuze calls philosophy. When the American actress Jessica Tandy complained, first to director Alan Schneider and then, bypassing him, directly to Samuel Beckett, that *Not I*'s suggested running time of twenty-three minutes rendered the work unintelligible to audiences,² Beckett telegraphed back his now famous but oft misconstrued injunction, ‘I’m not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I hope the piece may work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect’ (Brater 1974 200). If we take Beckett at his word and don't simply treat

2 Of late, performances of *Not I* have taken on as much the character of athletic competitions as theatre events, actresses performing not only for a personal best but for a world record as well. In May 2013, forty years after the landmark 1973 Billie Whitelaw world premiere under Samuel Beckett's direction, *Not I* returned to the Royal Court Theatre with a performance by anointed Billie Whitelaw successor, Lisa Dwan, who was ‘tutored in the role by Billie Whitelaw’, as the Royal Court's press release and the post production video interview with Whitelaw (from 2009) inform us. Dwan's iteration was first performed at BAC in 2005, at the Southbank Centre in 2009, and the inaugural International Festival of Beckett in Enniskillen in 2012. The running time for Dwan's performance is an astonishing nine minutes, but still at a £20 ticket price, we might add, although on the night I saw the performance, 25 May, critic Michael Coveney proudly announced in the post production chat-up, the talk back to fill out the scant programme, that the nine-minute barrier had been broken. The evening's first question from the audience was whether or not Ms Dwan had a back story for the monologue. She admitted that she had as an *aide-mémoire*, but, mercifully, for the integrity of the performance, that is, she did not disclose it.

this comment as a one off, as a dismissal of the actress or an admonition that she listen to her director, through whom, he told her, he would hence communicate, then he is suggesting a theoretical position, a theory of theatre. Evidence for the latter may be found in his attitude about *Play*, which similarly should be staged at incomprehensible speed, language become sound, music even, a pace which, admittedly, many a director, Alan Schneider among them, has resisted. Beckett's instructions to Schneider were that '*Play* was to be played through twice without interruption and at a very fast pace, each time taking no longer than nine minutes', that is, eighteen minutes overall. The producers of the New York premiere, Richard Barr, Clinton Wilder, and, of all people, Edward Albee, threatened to drop the play from the programme if Schneider heeded Beckett's pacing. Schneider capitulated, and wrote to Beckett for permission to slow the pace and eliminate the *da capo*: 'For the first and last time in my long relationship with Sam, I did something I despised myself for doing. I wrote to him, asking if we could try having his text spoken only once, more slowly. Instead of telling me to blast off, Sam offered us his reluctant permission' (Schneider 1986: 341).

What then are we to make of so neural a theatre, one that seems to put the emphasis on what Deleuze, writing *after* Beckett, will call 'pure affect'? We can resist Beckett here, as Schneider's producers and, finally, Schneider himself did, or take him at his word; that is, this is how theatre works, not by cresting simulacra, not by dealing with overall truths, but by demonstrating process and change, life as immanence, even as it is materially rooted. 'Make sense who may', as Beckett concluded his valedictory work for the theatre, *What Where*. In these shorter plays, then, Beckett's most radical artistic vision, his most revolutionary theories of theatre, emerge. This brings us, moreover, to one of the most vexing and contentious questions in Beckett studies, the degree to which Beckett's work is representational at all, or, on the contrary, whether its persistent preoccupation is with resisting representation, or rather to focus on how slippery and artificial representations are as they are played amid the Plane of Immanence, the perpetual flow of being. That is, Beckett's art on stage or page is not a stand-in for another reality; it is that reality and more often than not 'virtual' in the Deleuzian sense of that term. Beckett's theatre is always a theatre of becoming, of deterritorialization, a decomposition moving towards re-composition, itself decomposing. It is a theatre of perpetual movement or flow, all comings and goings, a pulse that creates affect. Even as it often appears stationary or static, even amid the Beckettian pauses, images move, flow, become other, not representing a world that we know, but perpetually creating new worlds. Bergson would call this *durée*, Deleuze 'becoming', Beckett simply art. It is a theatre struggling to resist the world we know, struggling to resist conceptualizing our world and the condition of being since those are mere snapshots and not the process, the flowing, becoming.