

S. E. WILMER

Plural Meanings in Beckett

In this paper I want to examine the legacy of Beckett in several senses. First of all, I will consider some characteristics of his theatre work which we can distinguish as Beckettian and which will remain as a hallmark or point of reference for his work. Secondly, I will look at ways in which he has left his mark on Ireland as a writer. Thirdly, I will discuss some of the dramatists in the English-speaking world who have been influenced by his work.

First of all, what do we mean by Beckettian? If a new play was suddenly uncovered, how would we recognise that it was written by Beckett? Interestingly I received an email recently about a new play that had just been found and that scholars were ascribing to Beckett: “Just weeks after the centennial of the birth of pioneering minimalist playwright Samuel Beckett, archivists analyzing papers from his Paris estate uncovered a small stack of blank paper that scholars are calling ‘the latest example of the late Irish-born writer’s genius. The 23 blank pages, which literary experts presume is a two-act play composed sometime between 1973 and 1975, are already being heralded as one of the most ambitious works by the Nobel Prize-winning author of *Waiting For Godot*, and a natural progression from his earlier works, including 1969’s *Breath*, a 30-second play with no characters, and 1972’s *Not I*, in which the only illuminated part of the stage is a floating mouth.

“In what was surely a conscious decision by Mr. Beckett, the white, uniform, non-ruled pages, which symbolize the starkness and emptiness of life, were left unbound, unmarked, and untouched,” said Trinity College professor of Irish literature Fintan O’Donoghue. ‘And, as if to further

exemplify the anonymity and facelessness of 20th-century man, they were found, of all places, between other sheets of paper.’

‘I can only conclude that we have stumbled upon something quite remarkable,’ O’Donoghue added.

‘According to literary critic Eric Matheson, who praised the work for ‘the bare-bones structure and bleak repetition of what can only be described as “nothingness,”’ the play represents somewhat of a departure from the works of Beckett’s ‘middle period.’ But, he said, it ‘might as well be Samuel Beckett at his finest.’

‘It does feature certain classic Beckett elements, such as sparse stage directions, a mysterious quality of anonymity, a slow building of tension with no promise of relief, and an austere portrayal of the human condition,’ Matheson said. ‘But Beckett’s traditional intimation of an unrelenting will to live, the possibility of escape from the vacuous indifference that surrounds us—that’s missing. Were that his vision, I suspect he would have used perforated paper.’...

‘O’Donoghue said..., ‘In his final version, Beckett used his trademark style of “paring down” to really get at the core of what he was trying to not say.’

‘Some historians, however, contend that the play could have been the work of one of Beckett’s protégés.

‘Even though the central theme and wicked sense of humor of this piece would lead one to believe that this could conceivably be a vintage Beckett play, in reality, it could just as easily have been the product of [Beckett’s close friend] Rick Cluchey,’ biographer Neal Gleason said. ‘And if it was Beckett, it’s not outside the realm of possibility that, given his sharp wit, it was just intended as a joke. If Beckett were alive today, he might insist that it’s not even a play at all. It could be a novella, or a screenplay.’”¹

In this satire we can recognise many of the Beckettian characteristics such as his themes of starkness and emptiness of life, repetition with little purpose, and the unrelenting will to carry on in spite of it all. Also some of his aesthetic techniques are mentioned such as the paring-down minimalism, the nuances and subtleties, the sparse stage directions, the wicked sense of humour, the merging of form between novel and play,

¹ “Scholars Discover 23 Blank Pages That May As Well Be Lost Samuel Beckett Play”, *The Onion*, Issue 42, no. 17, April 26, 2006: <http://www.theonion.com/content/node/47722>.

with the novels serving as long monologues and the plays so pared down as to jettison characterization almost entirely. And it also alludes to the mountain of scholarship on Beckett, which is as much his legacy as is his own work.

Language versus Meaning

In reflecting on the title of this conference, “Plural Beckett Pluriel”, I thought that one of the features of Beckett that this satire omits and is perhaps one of the abiding characteristics of Beckett’s work is its contrariness or contradictory features. Beckett was a diffident man of extraordinary ability, and not someone to be pinned down. He didn’t want to be interviewed or lauded or made a fuss over. However, he was very conscious of his place in literature and very explicit about the nature of his writing. He was extremely careful with each word, and his later plays are a testament to the art of economy. It has been said that while his friend James Joyce wanted to include everything in his writing, Beckett wanted to take everything out and reduce it to the minimum.² One might have thought that by reducing things to their essence, by stripping away the chaff and getting down to the core, one would have been left with a clearer sense of meaning. On the contrary, in the work of Beckett, despite the stripping away, there is no clearer sense of what the work means. As the satirist jokes, he was aiming “to get at the core of what he was trying to not say.”

In fact Beckett seems to have been happier to create plural meanings, multiple meanings and nuances, rather than discrete meanings. Does this imply that he had no message or meaning that he wanted to convey? Obviously in *Eleutheria*, which seems to deal with the existentialists and the political situation in the 1940s, there is a hint at a political consciousness that is striving to express itself, but at the same time it is being muzzled. We know from his biography that he was sensitive to the social position of the Jews in Ireland because of his aunt being married to a Jew and that he was a member of the resistance movement against

² See, for example, Sean O’Mórdha, *Silence to Silence*, RTE film, 1984. See also, Israel Shenker, “A portrait of Samuel Beckett, author of the puzzling *Waiting for Godot*,” *The New York Times*, 6 May 1956, Section 2, p. 1, where Beckett explained in an interview with Shenker that Joyce was “tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I’m working with impotence, ignorance.”

the Nazi occupation of France as well as serving in the hospital at St.-Lô.³ Similarly, as Jackie Blackman has pointed out, there are numerous echoes of the Holocaust in such plays as *Endgame* with its ash cans and that one of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* was to be called by the common Jewish name of Levy.⁴ Equally in *Catastrophe* (which is dedicated to Vaclav Havel who was imprisoned by an oppressive government in Czechoslovakia at the time) there appears to be a hidden political agenda. However, it is evident that Beckett eliminated specific social and political contexts in his work, and that he resisted clarification and explication.⁵ (As the Director exclaims exasperatedly in *Catastrophe*, “For God’s sake! This craze for explicitation!” [Beckett 1986: 459]) Like a stone being thrown in a pool, his words and images create ripples of meaning that extend far beyond the original source. He used language like a poet, more interested in the sound of the language, in its musicality, and in the multivalent possibilities of meaning, or the plurality of meaning. Thus it is deeply ironic when Ham turns to Clov in *Endgame* and asks “We’re not beginning to... to... mean something?” And Clov replies: “Mean something! You and I, mean something! (*Brief laugh.*) Ah that’s a good one!” (*Ibidem*: 108).

Floating Characters versus Real People

Similar to this tension between language and meaning, we can also see a tension between his characters and real people. In Beckett’s plays we are not sure whether the characters really exist. Perhaps the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days* and *Catastrophe* have the most realistic features (and *Eleutheria*, which Beckett disowned, might also be included in this list). But even in *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days* and *Catastrophe* the characters don’t seem to have a real existence. Godot never appears, and so we don’t know if he is a fantasy or not. Pozzo and Lucky undergo a mysterious transformation halfway through the play as if they are the same but not the same characters. And Vladimir and Estragon, who are homeless, with no source of income, or little means of existence, behave

³ For example, see biographies by James Knowlson, Deirdre Bair and Anthony Cronin.

⁴ Jackie Blackman, “Beckett Judaizing Beckett”, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, 18 (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2007).

⁵ See S.E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett’s Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

as if they are like phantoms in a nightmare of constant and purposeless routines. Rather than maintaining individual characteristics, they act like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, with their dialogue consisting of mutually exchangeable and repetitive philosophical musings, without much purpose other than to keep each other company and get through the day.

Winnie in *Happy Days*, despite all her quotidian obsessions, seems to be unrealistically disappearing into a pile of sand so that we can't say that she inhabits the real world. By contrast the characters in *Catastrophe* seem to have real functions, a director, his assistant, and the protagonist or actor. However, the characters are emblematic rather than inhabiting a real world. They have no life or back-story beyond their functional existence in the play. Thus the play is happening more on a symbolic level, as a metaphor for interpersonal relationships and the hierarchies within the theatre and in other modes of life, rather than depicting any real form of characterization.

Other characters are even less real. Ham and Clov seem to be figments of the imagination. As numerous critics have suggested, the set conjures up the possibility of a giant head with two windows as eyes looking out on the world, so that the characters, rather than real people, could be acting out conflicting thoughts within the same brain.⁶ Krapp lives in the past, and communicates with a tape recorder rather than with another individual. The disembodied voice on the tape recording is as real a presence as Krapp, since it reflects a past of desires and memories, whereas Krapp himself hardly speaks.

In the later plays, the characters become progressively more and more like ghosts, occupying a space between being and non-being. In *Play*, the characters are apparently dead, inhabiting urns, and regurgitating past events and memories in a never ending cycle of purgatorial recrimination. In *Footfalls*, we are never sure if the mother character is alive or dead, there or not there, since she is a disembodied voice. And the character of the daughter whose name seems mysteriously to change from May to Amy, disappears towards the end of the play.⁷ Beckett also

⁶ See, for example, C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarsky, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 177.

⁷ When Billy Whitelaw, who was playing the daughter, asked Beckett if her character was alive or dead, he replied, "Let's just say you're not quite there." Quoted in Barry McGovern, "...they want to be entertained...", *Reflections on Beckett*, Anna McMullan and S. E. Wilmer, eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming).

plays with our sense of the reality of the situation by suddenly having the younger character speak in the third person: “Old Mrs Winter, whom the reader will remember, old Mrs Winter, one late autumn Sunday evening, on sitting down to supper with her daughter after worship, after a few half-hearted mouthfuls laid down her knife and fork and bowed her head. What is it, Mother, said the daughter, a most strange girl, though scarcely a girl any more...” (Beckett 1986: 402). So, the audience is caught in a quandary. Is the character telling a story about herself in the third person? Is she speaking about another character? Is she speaking in the past about her mother and herself? Thus May not only disappears from the scene but also disintegrates in the dialogue. It is a significant switch in style, one might almost say that it marks a shift from high modernism to postmodernism, where character no longer remains coherent but becomes so fragmentary that it tends to disappear. And in his other short plays, Beckett continued to experiment with the being and non-being, embodiment and disembodiment, presence and absence, first and third person, actual voice versus recorded voice, of his characters, such as in *Rockaby*, *Not I*, and *Ohio Impromptu*.⁸

Time and Space

In addition to the tension between language and meaning, and between character and non-character, Beckett also opposed time and timelessness, and space and non-space. In his plays there is rarely a clear sense of when or where the action is happening. Perhaps the plays that are most time and space specific are *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Happy Days* and *Catastrophe*, e.g. Krapp's sixty-ninth birthday in his room and Winnie's summer day at the beach and the theatre scene in *Catastrophe*. However, even these plays confound the specificity of any time and space. Krapp's room could be anywhere, and the age of the tape recorder that is used on stage may give us more of a sense of a specific time period than any dialogue in the play, and so it is very unclear when and where it is happening. Moreover, Beckett is playing with time and space, with

⁸ See Katherine Worth, “Beckett's Ghosts” in *Beckett in Dublin*, S.E. Wilmer, ed. (Dublin: Lilliput, 1992), pp. 62-74 for a discussion of ghost-like characters in his work; and Terence Brown, “Yeats and Beckett: the Ghosts in the Machines”, *Reflections on Beckett*, Anna McMullan and S. E. Wilmer, eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming), for a discussion of the use of technology to facilitate the fragmentation of character.

the tape recorder in *Krapp's Last Tape* as a kind of time machine that can whisk the character far into the past with the flick of a switch, contrasting his youthful vigorous voice on the tape with his current old age. Equally Winnie could be on any beach in a not very specific time.

Although having explicit character roles and functions, the characters in *Catastrophe* could be inhabiting any theatre anywhere. But equally Beckett plays with a contradiction between space and spacelessness. There is a kind of metatheatrical quality to the play, in that when it is being produced in a specific theatre, the action is occurring in that specific space and time where the audience is viewing it so that, at the same time as seeming to be a metaphor for any space and any time, it has a direct here and now relationship with the audience. Thus the audience can view the action on a metaphorical level as applicable to any situation. However, at the same time, the audience can become implicated in the action, observing and allowing through their silence, the mistreatment of the protagonist. The members of the audience are witnesses, viewing something that could be happening anywhere but which also reflects on their own passivity as audience members to the dictatorial actions of the director. On one level, the play could be symbolic of their lack of activity or powerlessness in regard to the predicament of Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia in the early 1980s. But it is not specific about this. It could equally reflect the conditions in the theatre industry.

Beckett's other plays are even less definite with regard to time and space. *Endgame* could be happening in a post-holocaust universe or in a fantasy space and time. It could be a metaphorical environment suggesting a psychological time and space, or it could be a kind of post-world purgatory, a step into the void between existence and non-existence. *Waiting for Godot* could be happening on any road at any time, with the characters unsure where they are and whether one day is any different from the last or the next. Again it could be a kind of psychological space where fantasy characters come and go and one waits for something or nothing to happen. Both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* play with timelessness in the sense of an infinite or unending time, with actions that endlessly repeat themselves, so that the ends of both plays are not only the end but also the beginning, and so time becomes circular and infinite rather than linear and limited. *Footfalls* seems to be taking place in someone's home, where a woman seems to be caring for her mother and waiting for her to die, but the only indicator of place is the light on stage, and the number of steps that the daughter figure takes, and again

it is non-specific in terms of time, except that there seems to be a chronological sequence from being to non-being, that is to say from the daughter's presence to her absence, indicating the passage of time and perhaps her death. However, again it seems to be happening in a non-real space, a kind of psychological purgatory, where the same routines are repeated without much variation, until all routines cease. Similarly *Play* is happening in a non-place and in a non-time, perhaps it is a graveyard where the urns are in graves and the souls of the dead are speaking to themselves, and to each other, thus inhabiting an impossible time and space, a timeless time and a spaceless space which again represents a kind of purgatorial non-space of endless time where the characters are stuck in repetition of the same phrases and sequences, and as in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, a circular rather than linear time. And so, in many of these works, there is a sense of a floating time and space, a purgatorial existence between being and non-being, existence and non-existence.

In addition to these tensions between language and meaninglessness (or sense and nonsense), characters and non-characters (or being and non being), time and timelessness, and space and the void, Beckett plays with a number of other binary contradictions that create plural meanings: such as between humour and tragedy, birth and death, the real and the imagined, sound and silence, shadow and light, self and other, iteration and reiteration, power and impotence, order and chaos, knowledge and the unknown (or unknowable), sight and blindness, memory and forgetfulness, mobility and immobility, hope and despair, speech and silence, freedom and compulsion, the able-bodied and the disabled, health and sickness, familiarity and strangeness, poverty and plenitude, image and reflection, the perceiver and the perceived, etc. Thus his work is full of logical contradictions and plural meanings which puzzle us and create enormous scope for scholarly and philosophical enquiry that has led to mountains of scholarship as well as parodies and imitations.

Beckett in Dublin

I now want to turn to some aspects of Beckett's legacy in Ireland. One of the most obvious features of this legacy is the industry of Beckett plays, novels, and memorabilia, and the desire to reclaim Beckett as Irish even though he spent most of his life in France. Beckett's face has become a prominent image throughout the country thanks to the photographs of

John Minihan and others, and the paintings of Louis le Brocquy. In addition Eoin O'Brien has made Beckett's work seem even more Irish by rooting his texts in the Irish landscape in his book *The Beckett Country* (co-written with James Knowlson) which accompanied an exhibition of photographs of Ireland taken by David Davidson. Thus we can see photographs of his home in Foxrock as well as such familiar sites as the bathing place at "Forty Foot" in Sandycove juxtaposed with texts from *Company*: "You stand at the tip of the high board. High above the sea. In it your father's upturned face. Upturned to you. You look down to the loved trusted face. He calls to you to jump. He calls, Be a brave boy" (*apud* O'Brien 1986: 35). Likewise, a photo of the granite pier at Dun Laoghaire is accompanied by the text from *Krapp's Last Tape* in which the character talks about the momentous walk along the pier:

Intellectually a year of profound gloom until that wonderful night in March, at the end of the pier, in the high wind, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The turning-point, at last. This, I imagine, is what I have chiefly to set down this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place in my memory, and no thankfulness, for the miracle – (*pause*) – for the fire that set it alight. (*Ibidem*: 34)

The impression that one gets from studying these pictures and texts in Eoin O'Brien's book is that Beckett took Ireland with him when he went to France, and like Joyce, wrote Dublin and the surrounding countryside into the landscape of his novels and plays, even though in most cases the specific place names have been erased.

Another way of reclaiming Beckett for Ireland has been the work of the Gate Theatre, which bought the stage rights and performed all of Beckett's nineteen stage plays in a festival celebrating Beckett's work in 1991, and has been taking these productions around the world ever since. Such productions as *Waiting for Godot*, performed with quite heavy Dublin accents, and stressing the more playful and comic side of the drama, creates a more Irish feel to some of these plays, as another facet of reasserting the Irishness of Beckett. More recently the Gate Theatre has also produced all of these stage plays as original films (as opposed to filmed versions of stage performances), using prominent film directors and actors such as David Mamet, Anthony Minghella, Karel Reisz, Neil Jordan, John Gielgud, Jeremy Irons, John Hurt, Kristen Scott-Thomas, Julianne Moore and Harold Pinter, and sold these films in a DVD collection titled *Beckett on Film*. In addition Barry McGovern, one of the actors who has acted in the Gate Theatre productions of *Waiting for*

Godot and *Endgame*, also developed a one-man show in the 1980s based on Beckett's novels called *I'll Go On*, which has been frequently revived in the Gate Theatre and has also been performed around the world. Barry McGovern has also recently recorded reading the whole of Beckett's trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, which was transmitted on the radio and can be purchased in a box set of CDs. Again McGovern uses a pronounced Irish accent for some of the characters which also brings the trilogy closer to home. Another Irish actor who has made a career performing Beckett is Conor Lovett with the Gare St. Lazare Players that has produced *A Piece of Monologue* and *Texts for Nothing*, as well as *The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable*. Lovett has also produced a CD of his performance of *Molloy*.

The Beckett Centenary Festival in 2006 of course produced a host of Beckett events in Dublin, such as the Gate Theatre producing another round of revivals of earlier productions, as well as new approaches such as the television play *Eh Joe*, which was directed by Atom Egoyan at the Gate Theatre as a stage play and acted by Michael Gambon, later transferring to the Duke of York's Theatre in London. In addition there were events related to "Beckett and film", "Beckett and music", "Beckett and the visual arts", "Beckett and poetry", and even Beckett country tours organised by Eoin O'Brien. The national broadcasting service RTE radio and television have also transmitted a host of Beckett works, such as all seven of his radio plays. Thus Beckett, with his photograph reproduced on large posters throughout the city of Dublin, has been fully appropriated and commodified as Irish in the past year.⁹

One can also discern Beckett's Irish legacy in terms of his influence on fellow Irish dramatists. Many Irish writers from Brian Friel to Tom Murphy to Conor McPherson exhibit traces of Beckett's influence in their work. Many have adopted a minimalist monologue style with little set or interaction between characters, such as in Friel's *Faith Healer*, with its ghosts speaking from the grave. Marina Carr, the leading Irish female playwright, was strongly influenced by Beckett in the early stages of her career. In *Low in the Dark*, the characters of Bone and Baxter discuss birth and death in somewhat Beckettian terms:

⁹ There was also a major festival in Paris in 2006-2007 to celebrate Beckett. See: <http://www.parisbeckett.com>.

Bone: I was a natural birth. From paradise I came, through the chink, to this galaxy of grief. I'll never forget it and I'll never forgive her for it. Purged from the womb, jostled down the long passage, the umbilical cord around me neck, the grunting, the groaning, the blood, the shit, the piss, and the first scream, there was the point of no return. A rough start to a rough journey I tell you. I wouldn't wish life on my worst enemy, I'll have an abortion.

Baxter: We're all abortions, some later than others, that's all. But look on the good side Bone. Life is short, soon we'll be dead. (Carr 1999: 80)

This scene is not only reminiscent of the line in *A Piece of Monologue* "Birth was the death of him," and Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps," (Beckett 1986: 84) but also the extraordinary speech by Dr. Piouk in *Eleutheria*:

I would ban reproduction. I would perfect the condom and other devices and bring them into general use. I would establish teams of abortionists, controlled by the State. I would apply the death penalty to any woman giving birth. I would drown all newborn babies... And to speed things up I would encourage recourse to euthanasia by all possible means.

To which Mrs. Krap replies: "I was born too early" (Beckett 1996: 44-45).

In Marina Carr's later plays the juxtaposition of birth and death continues to be featured strongly. For example in three of her plays *Ariel*, *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*, major characters celebrate their birthdays which are linked with their deaths. As in Beckett's *Not I* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, which focus on the protagonists' seventieth and sixty-ninth birthdays (as well as Dan Rooney's birthday which becomes the day of a child's death in the radio play *All That Fall*), the characters in Marina Carr's plays reflect on the meaninglessness of their lives at the time of their birthdays and anticipate their exit from the world.¹⁰

Another Beckettian feature in Marina Carr's work is the use of ghosts and the ways in which the characters are haunted by the past. Just as in *Footfalls* or *Eh Joe*, *The Bog of Cats* features other worldly characters, such as Hester's brother Joe who comes back to haunt Hester for having

¹⁰ For a discussion of this idea, see Melissa Sihra, "Birthdays, Death-days and the 'ever incomplete character of being' in the Theatre of Carr and Beckett", presented at the Synge summer school 1 July 2005, privately held.

killed him. Hester herself treads a close line between this world and the next, walking the bog at night, speaking with ghosts, and anticipating her death. Likewise, Portia Coughlan is haunted by the death of her brother who beckons for her to join him in the world beyond, and finally lures her to her death. Similarly, Ariel returns to haunt Fermoy in Carr's play *Ariel*, and anticipates his removal to the land of the dead.

Another Irish writer who seems suddenly to have been influenced by Beckett late in his successful career is Tom Murphy. His latest play, *The Alice Trilogy*, which was performed in London and Dublin in 2006 focuses on a frustrated housewife who is both there and not there. This represents a marked change from Murphy's earlier plays that tended to focus on male characters and strong actions and conflicts. By contrast in *The Alice Trilogy* the audience cannot be sure if the action takes place in the mind of the character or in real life. Alice is joined in the first scene by her alter ego who steps out of a mirror and converses with her. Is Alice going mad, or has she gone mad, or is this a Beckettian memory play where the character revolves the issues in her past? Notice how the dialogue moves into the third person during the course of the dialogue:

Alice	Start again.
Al	Hockay, Alice! So, let me see –
Alice	Decent questions.
Al	Decent questions, start again, come again -
Alice	<i>Recommencer, encore une fois?</i>
Al...	Oh! I see! Very good, very good!
Alice	<i>Une fois de plus, je comprends, très bien?</i>
Al	So, the Loreto education wasn't wasted.
Alice	<i>blows a heavy sigh.</i>
Al	It's just that she's upset.
Alice	At the <i>moment</i> she's upset. (<i>A little testily.</i>)
Al	And it's just that she cannot think what it is exactly is upsetting her at the moment.
Alice	One of those days as like as not.
Al	<i>Another</i> of those days as like as not.
Alice	... Yeh. (<i>'Another' of those days worries her a bit.</i>)
Al	She'll be fine in a little.
Alice	Will she?
Al	Stands to reason.
Alice	Will she?
Al	It <i>doesn't</i> stand to reason?
Alice	She'll be fine.
Al	Stands to reason! (Murphy 2006: 301)

The play is divided into three scenes representing moments in her life when she is in her twenties, thirties and forties. In each of the scenes she seems unwilling or un-ambitious enough to take steps that will lead her out of her stasis.

In addition to having an impact on Irish writers, Beckett has also influenced Irish stage directors, as can be seen in their copying of the minimalist staging conventions of Beckett. The stark grey rooms of Beckett's short plays as well as *Endgame* have transposed themselves into other productions on the Dublin stage, such as Loose Cannon's 2005 production of Heiner Muller's *Medeamaterial*, the third movement of which looked exactly like a Beckett short play such as *Ohio Impromptu*, with a grey, dimly lit set, a single actor who scarcely moved, and grey walls and décor.

The International Legacy

The influence of Beckett on the English-speaking theatre has of course been immense and well documented. From the late 50s and 60s, writers such as Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Christopher Hampton, and others wrote in his shadow and adopted many of his conventions and techniques. More recently Sam Shepard, Maria Irene Fornes, Christopher Durang, Suzan Lori Parks, and Paula Vogel have followed in their footsteps. Shepard, for example, introduces a number of dislocated characters in his work, such as the Old Man in *Fool for Love*, Lee in *True West*, and Travis in his screenplay *Paris, Texas*; all these characters appear out of nowhere and can just as easily disappear again. And his latest play, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, which surprisingly received its world premiere at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in March 2007, features a lonely old man contemplating the meaning of life with Beckettian irony, after his horse has died leaving him stranded in a desert. When asked recently who had influenced him as a writer, Shepard replied:

Beckett. He's the only guy. He could be the only playwright on earth...I idolize Beckett from every aspect. He represented the epitome of the modern playwright.... Nobody was doing what he started. He totally reinvented it. He absolutely stood it on its head.¹¹

¹¹ Brian Bartels, "Sam Shepard's Master Class in Playwriting", *The Missouri Review* 30.2 (2007), p. 83, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/missouri_review/v030/30.2bartels.html, accessed 5 August 2007.

Paula Vogel has spoken of the way that Beckett opened out theatre to women writers in the 1970s and 80s by focussing not on the conflict between male characters leading towards a dramatic conclusion as in Aristotelian plays but by introducing a non-linear or circular approach to narrative. Vogel said that this circular form was particularly important for her work:

where the ending is the beginning, which comes from medieval drama as much as from Beckett, but it was important for me to see it used by a modern writer. The sense of returning to the beginning in a play, and even though nothing has changed, the perspective has changed about that beginning. Without that dramaturgical model, which Beckett gave me, there'd be no *Baltimore Waltz*, no *Oldest Profession*, no *Hot 'n' Throbbing*. The notion of the circle has been stamped on me by Beckett. To me, circular form is really, with *Waiting for Godot* in particular, what he brought back. And also the simple, phenomenological bareness of the stage, which relates to... whether Beckett will remain current and essential to us in the twenty-first century. Basically, he is bringing us back once again to the medieval approach: you have a platform in the public square, you don't need anything else. You do not need technology. You do not need special effects. You do not need spectacle beyond, say, a tape recording and the actor's body and the audience watching.¹²

Tony Kushner, the author of *Angels in America*, has mentioned his *fear* of Beckett:

He's very dangerous, because his voice is so overwhelmingly persuasive and influential. I never read him when I'm actually writing something. Because you can't. It's a voice that changes your own voice. It just completely overwhelms you. Or me at any rate. I always catch myself trying to write like Beckett.¹³

To conclude I will focus on the work of Suzan-Lori Parks, an African-American writer who has concentrated, amongst other themes, on the absence of African-Americans in history. Shortly after Suzan-Lori Parks won the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Top Dog/Underdog* in 2002, she launched into a massive project to write a play every day for an entire year. All of these plays, collectively titled *365 Days/365 Plays*, will be staged during 2006-7 in some 700 productions throughout the United

¹² Jonathan Kalb, "American Playwrights on Beckett", *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 29.1 (2007), p. 14, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/performing_arts_journal/v029/29.1kalb.html, accessed 5 August 2007.

¹³ Jonathan Kalb, "American Playwrights on Beckett", *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 29.1 (2007), p. 9, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/performing_arts_journal/v029/29.1kalb.html, accessed 5 August 2007.

States. Naturally, some of these plays are very short, reminiscent of *Breath* and other dramatic experiments by Beckett. According to Kathryn Walat:

The pieces vary from plays that are several pages long, complete with distinct characters and fully realized story arcs, to those that are only a paragraph in length – in some cases, they consist only of stage directions. Each is its own small work, its own theatrical moment; taken together, they create the sense of a much larger world, its edges running off the page. In one of the plays entitled, *This is Shit*, an audience gathers to watch a play and the character Program Thrower utters a single line (yep, the title says it all). *This is Shit*.

Another play in this marathon of 365 plays, is called *Things Are Tough All Over*, in which we can hear distinct echoes of Beckett. This is the whole play:

Things Are Tough All Over

A Woman leads a Man by the hand.

They've been walking for several days.

MAN: Where are you taking me?

WOMAN: I said you shouldn't ask.

MAN: I'm asking.

WOMAN: I'm taking you to see yr parents.

MAN: Liar!

WOMAN: I'm taking you to the cemetery.

MAN: I'm not dead. Not yet.

WOMAN: But you will be. And ever since they took the car and the house and the cart and the cow and the horse and the meadow – I lay awake at night for a whole month thinking, "When he goes, I'll have to carry him there, to the cemetery, on my back." This way, when we put you in the ground they'll say: "Here lies a man who came here on his own 2 feet."

MAN: I can dig the hole too.

WOMAN: We'll do it together, howbout.

MAN: Hop up. On my back.

WOMAN: Don't be silly.

MAN: Hop up, I'm telling you. I'll give you a piggy.

WOMAN: You won't last 10 steps.

MAN: Try me.

She hops on his back. He looks as if he'll die – but then the look passes. Then the look comes back.

MAN: Oh.

She jumps to the ground as he collapses.

WOMAN: Oh?

MAN

WOMAN

(Rest)

MAN: Did you miss me?
WOMAN: Terribly.
MAN: Piggyback ride?
WOMAN: No thanks.
MAN: I'm still a man.
WOMAN: Sure you are. Come on.
*She takes him by the hand and they continue walking.*¹⁴

In another play by Suzan-Lori Parks called *The America Play*, there is a strong connection with Beckett in regard to the tension between language and meaning, character and non-character, time and timelessness, and place and the void. Parks portrays forgotten characters trying to dig up their past in a wasteland called the great hole of history. For much of the play, the comic wordplay seems somewhat nonsensical, but it provides a disturbing discourse on an ethnic group in the United States that has been suppressed and erased from historical memory. The characters in the play are somewhat ghostlike.¹⁵ The father, who is a grave digger, is said to look like Abraham Lincoln, but as he is African American, he is a shadowy presence who speaks in the third person about himself and walks in the footsteps of Lincoln, barely leaving a mark. The closest he can come to Lincoln is as an impersonator in a fair ground where he dresses like him and is repeatedly shot by people wanting to act out the shooting of Lincoln. Thus he is a ghost of Lincoln but, unlike Lincoln, will not be remembered. The great hole of history is both a place and a void: a place where his wife and son look for the remnants of their missing husband/father (which works as a metaphor for African Americans looking for traces of their heritage). It is also a non-place or void, denoting the void or placelessness of African Americans (and their history) in American history. Moreover, it conveys a specific time conjured up by the remnants that they discover such as television images of the father but simultaneously there is a sense of timelessness that on a metaphorical level suggests that this search for a disappeared history is a never ending pursuit. I can imagine that Beckett would have appreciated the tragic irony of this image of two wanderers searching for a vanishing identity in the great hole of history. But in a sense it is too explicit for

¹⁴ Suzan-Lori Parks, *Things are Tough All Over*, *American Theatre*, November 2006, p. 29

¹⁵ For a discussion of the Beckettian imagery in *The America Play*, see Joseph Roach, "The Great Hole of History: 'Natural' Catastrophe and Liturgical Silence", in *Reflections on Beckett*, eds. Anna McMullan and S.E. Wilmer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming).

Beckett. As it hints at the deprivation of a particular ethnic group, it is too political, not sufficiently plural in meaning and ambiguous in intention.

Trinity College Dublin

References

BECKETT, Samuel (1986). *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber.

— (1996). *Eleutheria*, tr. Barbara Wright. London: Faber and Faber.

CARR, Marina (1999). *Plays: One*. London: Faber & Faber.

MURPHY, Tom (2006). *The Alice Trilogy, Plays: Five*. London: Methuen.

O'BRIEN, Eoin (1986). *The Beckett Country*. Dublin: Black Cat.