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Glynn, Dominic ; Gouvard, Jean-Michel

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Jouer Beckett/Performing Beckett

Introduction

Dominic Glynn and Jean-Michel Gouvard

City University of Hong Kong and University of Bordeaux Montaigne

Keywords: Beckett, staging, theatre history, critical reception, bilingualism

Mots clefs: Beckett, mise en scène, histoire du théâtre, réception critique, bilinguisme

Beckettian *sphères*

Rather than a sphere, the world of Beckett studies is perhaps more akin to a flattened cylinder, ‘assez vaste pour permettre de chercher en vain’.¹ There is indeed a plethora of existing studies of Samuel Beckett, which approach his work from different disciplinary angles. Many important publications, for instance, consider Beckett’s legacy in literature,² in thought,³ and analyse contemporary theatre productions of his work.⁴ The reception of his work in music⁵ and contemporary art⁶ are also thriving research areas. With this in mind, *why* and *how* might an academic journal renowned for charting little explored or marginalized territories in the constellation of French studies revisit such oft-trodden ground?

Paradoxically, it is precisely Beckett’s canonical status as a modernist writer of both French- and English-language literature that warrants further investigation. Following the success of Roger Blin’s initial production of *En attendant Godot* in a small Parisian Left-Bank theatre, the Théâtre de

- 1 Samuel Beckett, *Le Dépeupleur* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1970), p. 7.
- 2 See *Beckett’s Literary Legacies*, ed. by Matthew Feldman and Mark Nixon (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), and *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman (London and New York: Continuum, 2009).
- 3 See Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 4 See Nakta Bianchini, *Samuel Beckett’s Theatre in America: The Legacy of Alan Schneider* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- 5 See Catherine Laws, ‘Beckett in New Musical Composition’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 23.1 (2014), 54–72.
- 6 See David Lloyd, *Beckett’s Thing: Painting and Theatre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

Babylone, in 1953, the appetite for performing Beckett has grown immensely. An English version of the play in 1956, directed by Peter Hall at the Royal Court, was well received by London audiences, quickly followed by French and English productions of *Fin de partie/Endgame*, respectively directed by Blin and George Devine – also at the Royal Court. Since then, these two plays, along with *Happy Days/Oh les beaux jours*, first produced in New York and Paris, have become an established part of English- and French-language theatre repertoires, with multiple productions staged every year by companies comprised of amateurs or stars of the stage and screen.

What is more, enthusiasm for *Godot* and Beckett's other dramas is not limited to French- or English-speaking language contexts. As contributions to Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman's volume *The International Reception of Beckett* demonstrate, there has been considerable interest for his work in Germany, Japan, Eastern Europe and, more recently, in North Africa, Brazil, or China. The ways in which Beckett has been translated into different contexts has shaped his reception in these target cultures. With translation being an act of rewriting, as André Lefevere has convincingly argued,⁷ Beckett's works have been re-authored many times, and given new voices. In Poland, for instance, Antoni Libera and Marek Kedzierski's translations are filtered through the idiosyncrasies of each, and in Luxembourg, *Godot* has been performed in a translation in Luxembourgian, by Guy Wagner, in a very colloquial style.⁸

From the perspective of translation, Beckett represents an interesting case study. He is one of the most famous proponents of self-translation, translating from French into English or vice versa. The practice of self-translation, as Adrian Wanner puts it, 'collaps[es] the roles of author and translator', thereby investing the translated text with more authority than one produced by an 'extraneous translator', since it is assumed to be 'closer to the original text'.⁹ 'At the same time', compared to another translator, the author is granted more leeway, 'as the intellectual owner of the text',¹⁰ to operate shifts in stylistic, lexical or thematic terms when moving from the target to the source text. This is evident with Beckett as both *En attendant Godot* and *Waiting for Godot* are taken to be, in broad terms at least, the

7 André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

8 Samuel Beckett, *Theater. Waarden op de Godot; Endspill; Katastroph; Wat wou*, trans. by Guy Wagner (Luxembourg: Éditions PHI, 2006).

9 Adrian Wanner, 'The Poetics of Displacement: Self-translation among Contemporary Russian-American Poets', *Translation Studies*, 11.2 (2018), 122–38 (p. 122) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2017.1336641>>.

10 Ibid.

same play, yet close analysis reveals considerable discrepancies between the two. Examples include, but are not limited to, the omission or substitution of certain culture-specific items relating to geography and politics in the latter, English, *Godot*.¹¹ While such changes are in line with a general tendency to universalize that translation scholars have long noted in target texts,¹² with regard to Beckett specifically, these changes have helped to fashion an image of him as a non-referential absurdist writer. This image was sustained by Jérôme Lindon's marketing in France, and Martin Esslin, whose *The Theatre of the Absurd* did a lot to promote the concept.¹³ Moreover, translating his work into a third language 'present[s] something of a conundrum for Beckett's *other* translators' who have to make sense of the differences between the bilingual texts.¹⁴

In addition to such interlingual translations, Beckett's works have many times been translated inter-semiotically from the page to the stage.¹⁵ For a theatre director, the Beckett equation is not simple. This was already the case in the first productions of his work. In Paris, Roger Blin, who directed the world premiere of *En attendant Godot*, had to deal with the precarious conditions of the small theatre in which the play was produced. In London, George Devine had to negotiate with both the author and the Lord Chamberlain's office in order to find a way of obtaining a licence for performance. In the end, the substitution of the expletive in 'the bastard, he probably doesn't even exist' by 'swine' was the key to unlocking the performability of the text. The relative (un)performability¹⁶ of Beckett has been a constant factor in the reception of his work. It is linked to the word choice and stage gestures contained within the plays, and which have been more or less easily accepted by different actors and cultures. Pierre Latour, who played Estragon in the original production, was, for instance,

11 See Jean-Michel Gouvard, 'Beckett and French War Propaganda. A New Source for *Waiting for Godot*', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 19.1 (2019), 1–22 <<https://doi.org/10.3828/jrs.2019.01>>.

12 See, among others, Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995).

13 See Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Bloomsbury, 1961; repr. 2016). Esslin was Beckett's sound engineer at the BBC in the 1950s, while Jérôme Lindon was head of the Éditions de Minuit from 1948 to 2001.

14 Matias Battistón, 'How I did not translate Beckett', *Translation Studies*, 12.1 (2019), 109–23 (p. 109) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2019.1602562>>.

15 For discussion of the trope of theatre as a form of inter-semiotic translation, see Zuber-Skerritt, Ortrun, *Page to Stage: Theatre as Translation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi 1984).

16 For further discussion of the concept of (un)performability, specifically in relation to translation, see Dominic Glynn and James Hadley, 'Theorising (un)performability and (un)translatibility', *Perspectives. Studies in Translation Theory and Practice* (2020), 1–13 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2020.1713827>>.

very reticent to drop his trousers, while in China, when *Godot* was finally allowed to be translated in the 1960s following a relative abatement of censorship, it was initially negatively received by critics and intellectuals.¹⁷ In addition to political censorship, many directors have had to struggle with another form of censorship, imposed by the author and his estate, which has frequently been unwilling to accept what they see as deviations from the text. Performing Beckett is thus very much a case of working through a set of constraints. Yet, such constraints may in fact provide springboards for creative experiment, as productions by leading theatre directors in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first century have demonstrated.¹⁸

French and global Beckett

This special issue is a tribute to four study days held at the Université de Bordeaux Montaigne (France) and the Institute of Modern Languages Research (UK) in 2017.¹⁹ The study days brought together academics and theatre practitioners to consider the extent to which the reception of a playwright's work is determined by the performance conditions in the country where such work is performed. The bilingual nature of this forum for research is reflected in the fact that this special issue includes contributions in French and English.

The special issue 'Jouer Beckett/Performing Beckett' is structured in two parts. The first examines what one might call the 'French Beckett', or, more specifically, how a certain image of Beckett has been fashioned out of the reception of the premieres of his earlier plays *En attendant Godot*, *Fin de partie*, and *Oh les beaux jours*. The first two papers, by Jean-Michel Gouvard and Matthieu Protin, consider responses to the initial production of *En attendant Godot* at the Theatre de Babylone in 1953. Performance history has enshrined the opening run of the play, making it a mythical event in the lineage of la 'bataille d'*Hernani*' or Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi* at the Theatre de l'Œuvre. Yet, even more than the above-mentioned moments, famous for their disruptions in the auditorium, Roger Blin's production has come to be an indelible reference point in future productions of Beckett's

17 See Lidan Lin and Helong Zhang, 'The Chinese response to Samuel Beckett (1906–89)', *Irish Studies Review*, 19.4, 413–25 (p. 415) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2011.623465>>.

18 For a theoretical conceptualization of constraint, see Dominic Glynn and Sébastien Lemerle, 'La Littérature en médiations: Introduction', *French Cultural Studies*, 30.2 (2019), 97–104 <<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0957155819842803>>.

19 The editors are grateful for the support of the Cassal Trust Fund as well as TELEM and the Université de Bordeaux Montaigne, which enabled these study days to take place.

works in France. The austere setting, which owed as much if not more to the material conditions than to any artistic decision, has come to define Beckett. By going back to the founding event and questioning how such an impression of Beckett and his work has been fashioned out of the initial images in the critical accounts of the production, Gouvard and Protin delve into the critical discourse of the studies.

The first part concludes with the transcription of a roundtable discussion that took place at Bordeaux in March 2017, in which directors Jean-Pierre Vincent and Marc Paquien talk to Marie Duret-Pujol (Bordeaux Montaigne) about their practical experiences of staging Beckett. What is significant is how each director places himself implicitly in the lineage of the first directors of Beckett's work by wanting to serve the text. Vincent and Paquien's understanding of his work both concludes the discussion on the French Beckett and serves as the springboard to the second part, which considers how Beckett has been staged in various global contexts.

Dominic Glynn then views Beckett through the prism of the directorial practice of Peter Brook. Until recently, Brook is not a name that one would necessarily associate with Beckett. Yet, his writing shows that Beckett is a significant reference for the English-born director working in France. Moreover, Brook's productions of Beckett's work highlight unorthodox positions – both with respect to his other stage work and with regard to other productions of Beckett. Pascale Sardin considers Beckett's work in production through the lens of another famous name in theatre history, Robert Wilson, as well as Cuban activist – or activist – Tania Bruguera. What the piece highlights is how the playwright's political and aesthetic dimensions come to the fore in different ways at the hands of the directors. Specifically regarding Bruguera, *Endgame* becomes the means to highlight surveillance and punishment. As for the Wilson piece, it goes against the understanding of Beckett as fixed by Blin. Evelyne Clavier takes this reflection one step further to think about Beckett without the text but in gesture, by looking at dance interpretations of the play.

The special issue is brought to a close by the personal recollections of Everett Frost, who directed the award-winning American radio broadcasts of five Beckett radio plays. Frost's insights into not only the dramaturgy of the piece but also how Beckett worked with composer Morton Feldman on the radio play *Words and Music* cast the dramatist in a new light. Rather than the customary impression of a tyrant in the rehearsal room, here Beckett appears as a thoughtful collaborator. Frost's piece, as with the other pieces in this special issue, looks to upturn commonly held ideas in the sphere of francophone and anglophone Beckett studies.

A note on Beckett and Proust

In June 1930, as Samuel Beckett was in Paris, at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, he learnt that the novelist Richard Aldington and the publisher and patron Nancy Cunard were sponsoring a contest for a poem on the subject of Time, with a ten pound prize. In need of money to stay in Paris for the summer, he wrote in a few hours in a restaurant a text entitled *Whoroscope*, and won the award. This poem depicts the French philosopher René Descartes remembering his life just before he died, as he was at the Swedish Court of Queen Christina. Beckett made a mockery of Descartes's life, in the aim to criticize rationalism and to deny it. He also parodies Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* by suggesting life is a nonsense and cannot be saved by literature. So *Whoroscope* is nonetheless a poem on Time, but also on Proust's relation to Time, a subject Beckett was also working on at this period, for what would become his first published essay. In this respect, it was quite logical to publish in this special issue on Samuel Beckett a poem on Time, written by Marcel Proust, and its translation in English by Louise Brown.