



BECKETT AT 100 REVOLVING IT ALL

EDITED BY LINDA BEN-ZVI AND ANGELA MOORJANI

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Revolving It All

Edited by

Linda Ben-Zvi *and* Angela Moorjani

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For Ruby Cohn



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Beckett at 100

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Introduction

LINDA BEN-ZVI

SAMUEL JOHNSON, in making the claim for the greatness of Shakespeare, argued that “a test of literary merit” can be determined by whether a writer has “outlived his century” (qtd. in Quinault 304). If any proof were needed for the greatness of Samuel Beckett, the 2006 outpouring of events around the world marking the centenary of his birth—stage and media performances; conferences and lectures; new editions of his writings; gala concerts; and art, film, and photography exhibits—indicate that he too has “outlived his century.”

“I am not sure what a centenarian Samuel Beckett would have made of these effusions in the country of his birth,” his nephew and executor Edward Beckett wrote in the official catalogue for the Dublin festival, alluding to his uncle’s well-known dislike of any celebrations in his name, “but I am proud to witness what his country is making of him” (2). Unlike James Joyce, whom his biographer Richard Ellmann claims, “thought about his centenary long before it occurred to his readers to do so” (par. 1), Beckett tried assiduously to avoid such occasions. In response to one planned in Paris to mark his seventy-fifth birthday, he confided to his friend and scenic designer Jocelyn Herbert: “I dread the year now upon us and all the fuss in store for me here, as if it were my centenary. I’ll make myself scare while it lasts, where I don’t know. Perhaps the great Wall of China, crouch behind it till the coast is clear” (qtd. in Knowlson 671). “Damned to fame,” he jotted in his notebook at the time, the phrase his biographer James Knowlson chose as the title of his book. Yet, even China—a country still primarily wedded to Ibsen and O’Neill realism and which officially ignores its own

Beckett-influenced, Nobel Prize-winning writer Gao Xingjian¹—would have provided little anonymity in 2006, given the considerable number of Beckett events held there.²

While the centenary frenzy might have troubled Beckett, it has served a purpose. It has brought new audiences and readers to his writing; it has also provided opportunities for scholars and theater practitioners to rethink traditional readings, theories, and stagings of his works; consider new contexts and approaches for future research and productions; and generally reassess Beckett's place in his own century and his legacy to the postmillennial world. The purpose of this collection—the first to be published after the centenary year—is to offer a wide range of essays reflecting these directions and illustrating what contemporary scholarship is “making of” Beckett and his writing 100 years after his birth and 19 years after his death.

The majority of the essays were first presented at Trinity College Dublin, Beckett's alma mater, in the Samuel Beckett Working Group symposium, which served as the academic component of the Dublin centenary celebration in April 2006. Thirty-eight participants from fourteen countries gave papers; of those, fourteen are published here, along with eight others, most by previous Working Group members.³ We have divided them into three broad categories: Thinking through Beckett, Shifting Perspectives, and Echoing Beckett. Like most of Beckett's plays, in this book too images precede words. The book opens with experimental filmmaker and scholar Peter Gidal's selection of stills from his *Room Film 1973* whose “ill-seen” fragments resonate with Beckett's attacks on the authority of eye and “I.” And James Knowlson offers never-before-published descriptions excerpted from Beckett's 1936–1937 Germany travel diary, with permission from the Beckett Estate.

These selections and the essays that follow are dedicated to Ruby Cohn, charter member of the Working Group and the most consistent and influential voice in Beckett scholarship from its inception. Ruby published her first Beckett essay in 1959, undeterred by an editor who informed her, “We like your criticism, but we don't feel your author merits publishing space” (*Canon* 1); and for nearly 50 years she has been illustrating the “merits” of “her author.” Her meticulous scholarship laid the foundations of Beckett studies; her lucid writing, elegant and always to the point, nourished it; and her great generosity of spirit provided the model

for the collegiality that has developed among Beckett scholars. All those who study Beckett are familiar with her work. Most in the field know her personally. Some have maintained friendships with her that go back decades—mine thirty years. Angela Moorjani tells of hoarding Ruby moments ever since Édouard Morot-Sir invited Beckett scholars to muse over his “art of rhetoric” two years before Beckett’s seventieth birthday. For us Ruby is more than a respected critic; she is our intellectual conscience, our ideal reader. I remember my Colorado colleague Rubin Rabinovitz—a fine scholar whose early, tragic death impoverished our field—telling me that when he wrote on Beckett, he wrote for one person: Ruby Cohn. I knew exactly what he meant. To write “for Ruby” means to write clearly, without cant or pomposity, and, most important, to be faithful to Beckett’s work, no matter from what critical direction you approach it.

Revolving It All, the subtitle of this book, relates to Cohn’s work. The phrase is taken from *Footfalls*, where it is descriptive of the central image of that play, the “revolving walker,” herself a semblance of those continuously revolving, mutable characters, places, and themes that pervade Beckett’s writing and evade fixity. These tenacious traces of presence, desiccated though they may be, are still attached to the physical world of bodies, things, and places, whether unnamed, variously named, or misnamed. Cohn described this condition in the first lines of her first Beckett study, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (1962):

On Samuel Beckett’s planet, matter is minimal, physiography and physiology barely support life. The air is exceedingly thin, and the light exceedingly dim. But all the cluttered complexity of our own planet is required to educate the taste that can savor the unique comic flavor of Beckett’s creation. Our world, “so various, so beautiful, so new,” so stingily admitted to Beckett’s work, is nevertheless the essential background for appreciation of that work. (3)

Her own work on Beckett over the years has consistently focused on the here and now of the texts, and the theatereality—her coined word (*Just Play* 30–31)—of his stage world, a practice shaped by what she admits is “my habitual search for meaning” (*Canon* 383) and sustained by her abiding excitement about theater, “the most perishable of goods” (*Modern Shakespeare* 393). In criticism never cut to fit the particular fashion of the

time, she has elucidated the links between Beckett's writing and lived experience, between the challenging complexities of the plays, fiction, and poetry and the complexities of modern life that gave rise to them and continue to shape the powerful and personal reactions of readers, audiences, and critics over time. Cohn's title for her reading of the Beckett oeuvre, *A Beckett Canon*, reflects her awareness that every reading is *a* reading not *the* reading, hers "personal, after long immersion" (2).

On the first page of that book she declares, "I flaunt the label that has sometimes been scornfully affixed to me—humanist" (1). After a period in which some theoretical approaches have omitted lived experience from the parameters of their discussions, a growing number of centenary studies seem to have come back to Cohn and her basic starting point, paraphrased by Steven Connor in a lecture at the 2006 Tokyo symposium: "the uncompassability of the here and now, that is possible of access only in the here and now" (5), this presentment of presence the locus of Beckett's writing, no matter how "parched, patched, [and] penurious" (7) it may be. "In such a world that's all I can manage, more than I could," Beckett told Alan Schneider (qtd. in Harmon 24); and "in such a world" palpable, present, but ultimately unknowable, unnamable, and unencompassible, Cohn's criticism, like Beckett's writing, is grounded. So too in different ways, are the essays that follow.

Despite a personal predilection toward explication, I forgo the extensive parsing that is part of traditional introductions to essay collections. The subtlety and complexity of the essays, their arguments, language, and style—what has always marked the best of Beckett criticism—are lost in paraphrase. What I do want to point out, however, are some emerging themes and approaches that run through a number of these centenary studies. I will begin by using a technique William Saroyan employed in his sleeve note review for the recording of the Broadway premiere of *Waiting for Godot*, unearthed and discussed by Mary Bryden in her essay: mentioning what is not included as a way of pointing to what is. In these essays there are no comprehensive readings of the Beckett canon or even one specific work, as might be expected given the centenary opportunity for account-taking. Nobel Prize-winning novelist J. M. Coetzee, whose doctoral dissertation was on Beckett's early fiction, chose as the title for his public lecture at the Tokyo conference "Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett," each way a discrete form and approach, the aggregate producing multivocality much like Beckett's with no attempt to impose thematic unity.

If there is no “clear autobahn through Beckett’s works”—as poet Paul Muldoon admitted at the end of his lecture at the Dublin conference in which he attempted to explicate references in *Watt* in order to arrive at a unified reading of the novel—some routes earlier traveled are no longer being taken. For example, feminist readings have either run their course or are so self-evident that they need not be pursued. The same goes for studies of the body; to use Beckett’s words, there is “not another crumb of carrion left” (*Ill Seen* 59), at least concerning descriptions of Beckett’s decrepits. Readings exclusively based on specific poststructuralist thinkers have become rarer as their works become successfully incorporated into broader readings, as illustrated in a number of studies that follow.

Those are some of the subjects not included. The major trends emerging from the centenary and presented in this book can be divided roughly into five categories that generally traverse the book’s tripartite division.

1. Historicizing and Particularizing

One striking trend is the acceleration in the number of studies that have looked at Beckett’s works through multifocal lenses correcting for the historical as well as the metaphysical or universal. In his personal, powerful essay Herbert Blau notes the “political immediacy” he found in the Beckett plays he directed in the 1960s—more political than those of Brecht—and argues their relevance to our contemporary world that has learned nothing from the past. Blau, David Houston Jones, Anna McMullan, and Mariko Hori Tanaka all point to concrete images related to Beckett’s experiences in World War II and the Holocaust, which some earlier critics tended to universalize or overlook: the barbed wire that encircles the Krap apartment and the family’s indifference to it in *Eleutheria*; the corpses and skeletons in the “charnel-house!” of *Waiting for Godot*; the stink of death hovering over *Endgame*; and those unnamed but ubiquitous torturers and tortures that run through the entire canon.⁴ As Blau argues, while Beckett’s people curse their birth, their words also point to Beckett’s “undeluded awareness of those corporeal bodies out there, or once there, but incinerated, or buried too, some of them, not where death came with birth, but where, dead, yes dead, imagine, they’ve never yet been found, or in a mass grave, among the multitudinous dead” (48). An important intertext for connecting the ontological and the historical, Jones and Hori Tanaka suggest, is

Remnants of Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben's exploration of the possibilities of testimony after the Holocaust, in which he argues that only the absent, silent dead, the corpses, or those living-dead—the *Muselmann* of the concentration camps—can testify, speaking “only on the basis of the impossibility of speaking” (164), an awareness that lies at the heart of Beckett's work⁷ and is reflected, Jones indicates, in Beckett's linguistic displacements and the multiple naming that point to the impossibility of ever claiming the subject position. In a variation of the argument, Carla Locatelli suggests that a chain of images, rather than names, can be substituted for agency, as illustrated in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Not I*, reflective of both the impossibility of autobiography and the desire for it by audiences and readers who assign agency to Beckett as unitary author of his work in order to assuage their own sense of lost subjectivity in the contemporary world.

2. Contesting Isms

If Beckett's writings can be historicized and particularized as well as universalized, then the question arises: where is he—and who is he—when he is home? McMullan calls his writing exilic, marked by an alterity that denies fixed classification of any kind, such as the recent Irish trend toward Hibernianization of Beckett and his works, a process she claims exchanges one “we” for another, and which Beckett warned against in “The Capital of the Ruins.” On the other hand, Jürgen Siess argues that in cultivating the stance, or *posture*, of outsider and decentered writer, Beckett was paradoxically looking for an entry into the Parisian literary field he found when he arrived there in the late 1930s.

Nationalism, like any other ism or defining belief system, was anathema to Beckett; therefore, as Porter Abbott suggests, he repeatedly denied that he was a philosopher, since “the philosopher's trade [...] is to make a system with noncontradictory parts” (85), whereas art, Beckett understood, was predicated on “letting go,” renouncing control of any sort. That is not to deny the part that philosophy has played in Beckett's writing. Over the years, numerous studies have explored the subject. In this current collection, Stan Gontarski suggests the importance of the theories of Henri Bergson, whom Beckett discussed in his 1931 lectures on modern literature

at Trinity College; and Naoya Mori probes Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's theories of motion that he argues parallel those employed by Beckett.

3. Coupling the Arts

The relation between Beckett's works and other art forms has gained critical attention in recent years, prompted by the biography of James Knowlson and studies such as Lois Oppenheim on art and Catherine Laws on music. Almost every centenary event included exhibits of paintings influencing or influenced by Beckett; concerts featuring the works of composers who set music to Beckett texts, including Morton Feldman, Philip Glass, Heinz Holliger, Earl Kim, György Kurtág, and Marcel Mihalovici; and tapes of Beckett's film, radio, and television productions. In this collection, Laws's essay typifies this interdisciplinary approach, detailing the ways in which the techniques of Beckett, Feldman, and Jasper Johns have points of complementarity, indicated by their similar nonreferential frames of reference. Beckett's fascination with music's simultaneities and his dazzling blend of artistic allusions—from ancient Egypt's underworld to Adam Elsheimer's boundless space—are the focus of Angela Moorjani's essay on the multi-tiered and destabilizing effects of *Play*. Two essays discuss Beckett's work related to film and television: Matthijs Engelberts's study suggesting the importance of film criticism, particularly the writing of Rudolph Arnheim, on Beckett's *Film*; and my essay reading selected Beckett television plays through the theories of media guru Marshall McLuhan, a new name in Beckett studies, whose own writing references Beckett.

4. Selecting a Text for the Times

Critics in specific periods have tended to focus on certain Beckett writings that most directly illustrate contemporary concerns. In the 1960s and 1970s in drama it was *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*; in the 1980s *Happy Days* or *Not I*; in this decade, judging from these centenary essays and other recent research, it is *Krapp's Last Tape*.⁶ Carla Locatelli, Enoch Brater, Irit Degani-Raz, and Antonia Rodríguez-Gago all discuss it. Brater elucidates Beckett's strain of romanticism, most powerfully and evocatively evidenced in Krapp's recorded memory of the girl in the punt. Degani-Raz argues that

Beckett's use of the tape recorder can be understood as a modern reversal of the myth of Telephus—what wounds can heal—since rather than “healing human longing for a paradise that has been lost” by preserving memories, it actually distorts and corrupts, illustrating the destructive aspects of technology in the process (191). Rodríguez-Gago focuses on the performative construction of Krapp as both speaker and listener, interacting with the mechanical recorder, a theme Locatelli also explores, describing both the contrapuntal discrepancies between speaking and listening to oneself speak and the “arbitrary and fragmented nature of self-portraiture based on memory, especially when played ironically against willed intention” (73).

5. Tracing Influences and Impacts

Beckett's influence on other playwrights and novelists, and theirs on him, has been a constant theme over the years. The centenary studies in this collection, however, rather than confining themselves to delineating specific, shared similarities, tend to show the complexities, challenges, and dangers of literary legacies as well as benefits. Julie Campbell's essay on Paul Auster's debt to Beckett highlights the burden and anxiety of influence Auster felt and his means of overcoming it.⁷ Mariko Hori Tanaka adds Japanese post–World War II playwright Minoru Betsuyaku to the list of followers, illustrating the ways in which his post-Hiroshima plays are inspired by Beckett's images of pain and torture, just as Pinter's plays are as well. Mary Bryden pairs Beckett with William Saroyan, pointing to their surprising thematic connections, despite stylistic and linguistic differences, while Elin Diamond, although not suggesting influence, suggests the ways in which Caryl Churchill's plays, like Beckett's, create strong emotional responses despite the spareness of the texts. Beckett's own debt to Yeats has often been discussed, but in her essay Minako Okamuro cites the ways in which the poet's interest in the occult influenced Beckett's ... *but the clouds*... and *Words and Music*, as did Yeats's romanticism, a topic also taken up by Brater in his essay.

The final essay of the collection, by Hersh Zeifman, stands alone. It illustrates how Samuel Beckett, as well as *Waiting for Godot*, has become a cultural icon, and how the creator and his creations are being absorbed into popular culture around the world. To illustrate the tendency, Zeifman offers examples of Beckett citations in a number of recent plays: Justin Fleming's *Burnt Piano* (1999), Sean Dixon's *Sam's Last Dance* (1997), and Michael Hastings's *Calico*

(2004). What Fleming's work points to, and Zeifman underlines, is that "the only Beckett that truly exists for us is the one we create by responding to his work" (318). What has most strongly emerged from Beckett's centenary year and is reflected in the essays in this book is how rich, powerful, and varied these responses continue to be as we move into Beckett's second century.

Notes

1. Gao Xingjian's 1983 play *The Bus Stop* has obvious parallels to *Waiting for Godot*, in its ironic, yet politically charged, tale of people waiting ten years for the right bus to arrive.
2. Beckett events in China included a workshop held at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing led by Dublin director Sarah Jane Scaife; a festival of his short plays presented in Shanghai; and two versions of *Waiting for Godot*, one in Chinese opera style, the other the celebrated Dublin Gate Theatre production, directed by Walter Asmus, which had sold-out runs in both Shanghai and Beijing.
3. An additional group of essays from the Dublin Working Group will appear in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* (SBT/A) 18 (forthcoming 2007).
4. In addition to Beckett biographies, a number of works have explored the subject of Beckett and World War II and the Holocaust. See, for example, Blackman, Lamont, Moorjani, Perloff, and Uhlmann.
5. Russell Smith also reads Beckett through Agamben in his essay in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* (SBT/A) 18 (forthcoming, 2007).
6. The 2005 Beckett Working Group also chose *Krapp's Last Tape* for its central text. The members, writing about the work, found that they had barely uncovered its possibilities.
7. Auster was not alone; Jonathan Kalb's article querying twelve American playwrights about the influence of Beckett clearly shows this anxiety. David Mamet, for example, refused to respond, remarking only, "He was a great kisser," while Tony Kushner, after calling Beckett "that matzo of a playwright," as opposed to himself, more the lasagna type, spoke seriously of the influence, "so powerful that it threatened paralysis for a playwright [...] because his voice is so overwhelmingly persuasive and influential." See also Auster's and Edward Albee's comments in *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett* (Knowlson and Knowlson 229–34), which discuss the dangers that Beckett's bogey creates.

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Images

FOR RUBY COHN

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Still for Ruby

PETER GIDAL



from *Room Film* 1973









