

**MAKE SENSE WHO MAY:
BECKETT'S *A PIECE OF MONOLOGUE* (1979)
TO *WHAT, WHERE* (1983)**

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Samuel Beckett has challenged his audiences, readers and scholars alike with the puzzling lines "Make sense who may. I switch off." which end his latest piece of work *What, Where* (1983). With these two dismissive sentences, whose meaning we can only attempt to understand by referring them to the whole of his canon, he has put an end, so far, to a career in which every new work has been barer, tauter and more meaningful than the previous one, thus making possible that now, in a play by Beckett less definitely means more.

From that seminal work, *Waiting for Godot* (1955), in which he gave us four human beings, who had four complete bodies, and who for two full acts could walk, sit, talk, think and, especially, wait as they pleased, Beckett has gradually stripped his plays of all superfluous ornaments, all unnecessary elements, till they have only become the powerful visual and aural metaphors of the idea he wants to convey.

Now, in the eighties, his plays hardly last more than 15-20 minutes, they are not attached to any place or any time in particular, they deal with just a few different themes, and they are only inhabited by creatures who, either reduced to ashes or in their best black, reenact for us the last moments in their lives. The image they create is that of the aftermath of a cosmic disaster, a universe of loneliness and death, a world of dim light and lack of sounds, a nightmare in which the survivors have retreated into their inner selves and purposefully silenced their own voices—all the 'heroes and heroines' in these new plays are shut inside themselves in almost complete silence, listening to either somebody else's words, to their own recorded voices, or to their selfless, automatic delivery.

To communicate the essence of these plays Beckett relies on his characteristic devices of repetition, balance, pattern, and rhythm. Their impact is mainly caused by the striking images they create, and the haunting, and hypnotic effect they exert is due to the minute differences in words and tone, or to the slight changes in light, that to a keen ear and watchful eye betray the relentless approach of an unavoidable end.

In order to fully apprehend the kind of plays Beckett has been writing in the eighties —so, by comparing them to his previous works, we can appreciate in what way he has evolved over these three decades— I am going to analyse

here the five pieces that could be included within this period², that is: *A Piece of Monologue* (1979), *Rockaby* (1981), *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), *Catastrophe* (1982) and *What, Where* (1983).

In 1979 David Warrilow, the American actor, asked Beckett to write something for him on death. The playwright's answer was: "How could I say no?", and only a few months later he sent Warrilow *A Piece of Monologue* with a note that began with these apologetic words: "I don't expect you to do anything with this text...". Beckett himself was aware of the inner difficulty of the play he had written.

However Warrilow accepted the challenge set by the new piece, and decided that in order to solve the problem of memorizing the impossible, he would use play-back. Nevertheless, in practice, the fact of using a tape every single night proved to be altogether unsatisfactory and, in the end, the actor learnt the whole monologue by heart.

The piece was performed for the first time on December 14, 1979 in La Mama Theater, New York, and the first British première was on August 19, 1984 in Edinburgh during the Festival. In both instances it was played by David Warrilow, who was also the director, together with Rocky Greenberg.

A Piece of Monologue has been defined as "a dead-of-night soliloquy, an elegy to the brevity of life and the proximity of death"³ and even if the American critic proceeds then to warn us of the superfluity of its exegesis, we shall try to penetrate to the inner core of this descent into hell.

The subject and tone of the play are condensed in the pun of the very first sentence: "Birth was the death of him" and the speaker is so taken by this paradigm that - just as Listener will command in *Ohio Impromptu* later on - he asks: "Again" only to hear once more his own voice announcing "Birth was the death of him."⁴ The truism, about 'giving birth astride of a grave' that in *Waiting for Godot* had taken Pozzo a whole paragraph to outline, and Vladimir even a lengthier passage to explain, has now been distilled into its pure essence, leaving only the skeleton of the idea.

In that first play Beckett also needed forty-eight hours to communicate the boredom to which his creatures had been condemned, whilst in *A Piece of Monologue* simply one sentence — "Two and a half billion seconds." — will be enough to convey the tedium of all those minute fractions of time we have to live while going "From funeral to funeral."

The narrative of the play, that constitutes a vast black emptiness, mirroring the space created by Beckett on the stage, is interrupted five times when Speaker's mind retreats back into the memories of 'his' past. Pointedly his first souvenir recalls that 'birth' which began it all; that baby who "in cradle and crib" grins in a ghastly fashion "up at the lid to come", who from the very first action he performs — "At suck first fiasco." — realises the true condition of being born.

His second memory retells the scene already described by Beckett in *Film*

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when O looks at some family photographs which he destroys later on. In this late work the economy of means is strikingly effective once more, Speaker tells us in his monotonous voice, while "facing the blank wall" that it was "Covered with pictures once", he then proceeds to identify them for us (i.e. the marks on the "once white wall") "There was father. [...] There mother. [...] There all three. [...] There alone." while unmoved recounts how they were "Ripped off and torn to shreds. Scattered all over the floor. Swept out of the way under the bed with the dust and the spiders." (p. 266).

The three other instances in which Speaker stops his reliving and retelling of his past to pinpoint a particular moment are all about the same memory. Three times Speaker attends that funeral, on three different occasions he recalls that "grey light", the "rain pelting", the "streaming umbrellas", the "bubbling black mud", the "ditch", the "coffin", and three times he tries to conjure the horror, to wrench the truth out of his mind and embody it in a word, but three times his self recoils into the safety and blindness of a third person. The definite and crucial question, which only once stealthily and incompletely gropes through, "Whose?" grave, will never be answered in the first person. Speaker, like the mouth of *Not I* cannot accept the traumatic recognition that the very experience he is damned to recall forever is his own devastating past.

This tearing apart from one's self into a distant and safe third person is embedded in the very language of *A Piece of Monologue*. Beckett has combined several unusual elements which help to convey this aloofness from what is being said; possibly, the most striking are, the distancing quality of some of the lines, the convoluted sentence "he all but said of loved ones", and the cryptic phrase "Waiting on the rip word" (p. 269).

In this piece we are reminded constantly of the fact that we are watching a play. It can either be a single phrase —"That place beneath"— which, with its cinematographic quality, makes us see the scene by the grave as if happening to somebody else, not to him, or a whole passage in which the brevity and preciseness of the lines remind us of the conciseness of a stage direction, transforming the recalled past into a series of automatic gestures performed because of the will of an invisible director - "Match one as described for globe. Two for chimney. Three for wick. Chimney and globe back on. Turns wick low. Backs away to edge of light and turns to face wall. East. Still as the lamp by his side. Gown and socks white to take faint light."— (p. 267).

Six times Speaker interrupts the toneless recital of his ritualistic movements to hesitate for three seconds —the three dots written by Beckett— on the brink of his deepest secret, and in each case he recedes into the protective darkness of an obscure sentence. He may either abruptly stop an utterance — "From funeral to funeral. Funerals of...", "Covered with pictures once. Pictures of...", "Thousand shreds under the bed with the dust and spiders. All the...", "Ghost light. Ghost nights. Ghost rooms. Ghost graves. Ghost..."— or twist a question in its very formulation —"That place beneath. Which...?",

“Till whose grave?. Which...?”— but the concluding admission is always the same one: “he all but said of loved ones”. Some critics affirm that the “all but said” “suggests a Freudian slip, a reference to someone loved and yet not loved”⁵, but I would interpret this expression rather as his determination not to think and just seek refuge in what he, objectively, said, which allows him to persist in his non acceptance that, as we will conclude by the end of the play, the funeral, the picture, the ghost and the grave are nothing but his own.

In the very last section of the play, Speaker says: “Waiting on the rip word.” and later on explains: “From the word go. The word begone.” From that very first line —“Birth was the death of him.”— Beckett has used some of the elements he can mould according to his will —words and the visual image upon the stage, in this instance— to communicate to his audience the essence of the play: the immediacy and inevitability of death. We listen, three times, to the birth of language, and, therefore, to the birth of a new self who can now, orally, establish a verbal link with other human beings: “Waits for the first word always the same. It gathers in his mouth. Parts lips and thrusts tongue forward. Birth. Parts the dark.” (p. 268), and again, “Faint cry in his ear. Mouth agape. Closed with hiss of breath. Lips joined. Feel soft touch of lip on lip. Lip lipping lip. Then parted by cry as before.” and a third time “Stands there staring beyond waiting for first word. It gathers in his mouth. Birth. Parts lips and thrusts tongue between them. Tip of tongue. Feel soft touch of tongue on lips. Of lips on tongue.”

However as “Birth was the death of him”, this first word has already engendered the one that will end all utterance and all spark of life in the eighty-two-year-old man: the ‘rip word’ “begone”. The drying of the flow of language will run parallel to the dying of the self.

Next to this aural perception of birth and death, Beckett has also made use of the visual image the stage affords. Speaker stands motionless ‘well off centre downstage audience left’, to his right ‘white foot of pallet bed’, to his left ‘same level, same height, standard lamp, skull-sized white globe, faintly lit’. The old man recites his monotonous story trapped between the two poles which symbolise his beginning and his end; the bed hoards the secret of his conception, the kindling of that light for the first time —“Pale globe alone in gloom. Glimmer of brass bedrail.” (p. 267) —while the lamp, in its proximity, whiteness and dim light, only mirrors, respectively, his impending death, his own external appearance —“white hair, white nightgown, white socks”— and his old age. However Beckett’s incremental repetition of the affirmations “No such thing as none”, “No such thing as whole”, “No such thing as no light” suggest that complete nothingness and round fullness do not exist in our universe, therefore Speaker will neither be fully born, nor utterly dead, and probably the “story” he is retelling is no other but an account of his own aborted birth and his unfinished death.

The very delivery of the lines, following Beckett’s instructions, tends towards this interpretation. The toneless quality the playwright has been

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seeking since *Play*, is required here to show the dichotomy prevailing between the man in the story and the effect the tale has on the character on the stage. The piece has the same mesmeric quality we found in recitations, such as, for example, in *Footfalls* or *Happy Days*, and the same shocking effect we experienced when Vlamidir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* declared "Let's go", only to remain motionless on the stage; because in *A Piece of Monologue* Speaker enumerates with rhythmic monotony the different actions performed by 'he', without, even once, making the smallest gesture or betraying the slightest feeling.

A Piece of Monologue was chosen by BBC-Radio 3, to celebrate Beckett's 80th birthday (April 1986), and, due to this baring a play of all superfluous ornaments and reducing it to its starkest theatrical elements, it did not suffer great deterioration in its translation to a different medium. As Malcom Hay says:

"The stage images that Beckett supplies in such monologues grudgingly accommodate the theatre audience's natural desire for something to look at. But they are not fundamental to his purpose. The images are largely immaterial. Hence radio is a perfect medium for his work."⁶

In the case of Beckett one can even alter the outer layer of his work and make it fit into a different media without destroying the essential content. Ronald Pickup, the actor who impersonated Speaker for the BBC, observed, Beckett is "a playwright who should go straight into your head", and as a matter of fact this is what has happened here.

Another play that also speaks directly to one's mind is Beckett's next piece *Rockaby* (1981). If in the case of *A Piece of Monologue* the playwright answered the call of David Warrilow, in this instance he wrote the play having in mind the actress who ideally would play it: Billie Whitelaw, with whom he had already worked in plays such as *Not I* (1972) and *Footfalls* (1976). He sent it to Alan Schneider who directed it in its world première at the Center for Theatre Research in Buffalo, New York, on April 4, 1981, during a symposium held there to celebrate Beckett's 75th birthday⁷.

Rockaby is another one of the so called 'memory plays' in which one character either recites his past or listens to a recorded voice which retells the story. In this case a woman —W— sits on a rocking chair listening to her own recorded voice —V—, which she herself has prompted with the command "More". She sits motionless absorbed by the mantra the outer voice —or does it come from inside her mind?— intones, and only at some particular moments she joins that voice and chants antiphonally the same line. Both her commands and her voice-overs become every time gentler and softer as if implying also the dwindling of her physical strength. At the end all sound ceases, her eyes remain closed, her head drops softly on one side, the rocking chair becomes still, and the light fades away completely.

In minimalist art, when the artist has stripped his work of all secondary elements, the mind concentrates with particular power upon the scarce means provided. As Martin Esslin says “the dropped pin resounds with the impact of thunder if there is total silence surrounding its descent.”⁸, and this is the case of *Rockaby*. Every single element, of the very few provided here by Beckett is pregnant with meaning. This is the reason why we shall now carefully consider the playwright’s stage directions, down to their minutest detail.

With characteristic precision Beckett has chosen each one of the elements that will help him to interpret the music of this poem on solitude and death, and every one of them has acquired a symbolic meaning while contributing to the creation of a powerful and poignant image. Light, Beckett insists, should be ‘Subdued on chair. Rest of stage dark.’ thus dividing the physical space into two clearly defined areas, one the inhabited world of the chair, the other one the void, and while the chair rocks softly ‘to and fro’ the woman on it crosses the boundary into the two worlds incessantly, she passes from light to darkness in a succession of days and nights, immersed in the continuous flow of time. The ‘subdued spot on face’ shines constantly throughout giving life to the old woman, and only fades out when, after the last line, her ‘head slowly sinks’ and ‘comes to rest’.

However there is also another kind of light on the stage, which is even possibly more meaningful. Beckett specifies that the woman is ‘prematurely old’ with ‘unkempt grey hair’ and ‘huge eyes in a white expressionless face’, a woman, we might conclude, who has already chosen death as her companion and has now retired to the warm embrace of the arms of her rocking chair while awaiting her end. Therefore Beckett’s directions concerning her attire come as a shock to all of us: ‘Black lacy high-necked evening gown. [...] Jet sequins [...] Incongruous flimsy head-dress set askew with extravagant trimming’. We had never heard of such a lavish dress and hat since we met Winnie in *Happy Days*, but here, like there, all this extravagance has a purpose. The lacy gown, the sequins, the trimming, together with the polished surface of the wooden chair will ‘glitter’, ‘catch light’, ‘gleam’ when rocking, they will reflect the exterior light while suggesting an inner one belonging to the woman⁹. She may have chosen to die but there is still a spark of pure light inside her that is embodied in the four rounded commands she utters: “More” —in Billie Whitelaw’s performance as a famished mouth in need of nourishment—. It is Beckett’s idiosyncratic balance between pessimism and optimism, between the desire to die and the dogged courage to go on living, between a woman who accepts it is “time she stopped/time she stopped/ going to and fro” and who still prompts action —the rocking of the chair— and sound —her own recorded voice— relishing in the incantatory recitation of her past while asserting life in the present.

There is also another element, noticeable only in performance, that arises from this combination of light and darkness, black and white, shining surfaces and glittering beads. The visual image on the stage becomes a study of all these

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nuances, the texture of lace, crystal and wood merges softly with the black of the material, the grey of her hair and the white of her hands; lit by the subdued spot and encircled by the surrounding darkness W. becomes an eery figure, all eyes and begging mouth, who rocks herself into death while creating a symphony of shades and a poem of sound.

The play is divided into four different sections — 'Acts' according to Enoch Brater¹⁰— each one prompted by the command of W.. The first and third sections begin exactly the same: "till in the end/ the day came/ in the end came/ close of a long day" and end with the same line uttered twice — "time she stopped"—, the second time with the live voice accompanying the recorded one.

The second and fourth 'acts' also have a similar beginning — "so in the end/ close of a long day/ went back in"— but differ in their ending. While the second one concludes with the lines "high and low/ for another/ another like herself/ a little like herself/ a little like/ another living soul/ one other living soul" (p. 278), the last one ends with a shocking rejection of life: "and rocked/ rocked/ saying to herself/ no/ done with that/ the rocker/ those arms at last/ saying to the rocker/ rock her off/ stop her eyes/ fuck life/ stop her eyes/ rock her off/ rock her off" (p. 282).

These last puzzling words have been interpreted in many different ways, they are either "a last eery, unnervingly comic stab at defiance"¹¹, "an obscene renunciation of existence"¹², "a cruelty to the dead mother's image"¹³, but I would understand this passage the way Alan Schneider, the first director, defined it: "I considered it was accepting death, coming to terms with the mother's passing and 'fuck life' was not vicious but resigned and rueful."¹⁴ W, who softly and gently, with each sway of her rocking chair, has been lulling her own conscience into oblivion, in this final section has fully accepted her approaching death. She has gone "down/ down the steep stair" has "let down the blind" and sat "down/ right down/ into the old rocker" taking her mother's place in it, as she has chosen to go right down and be "her own other/ own other living soul", the haunting repeated sound of the adverb "down" drags us into the painful realization of her sad determination to disappear into her other self, to end like her mother.

Probably one of the most powerful moments, when watching the play, is the instant, in this fourth section, when the words catch up with what we see and finally both aural and visual images become a complete and tense whole. We have been listening to the alluring description of W's "going to and fro", to her sitting "quiet at her window", to her endless search of "another living soul", "another like herself" and now we realize that past and present have become one in front of our very eyes: "so in the end/ close of a long day/ went down/ in the end went down/ down the steep stair/ let down the blind and down/ right down/ into the old rocker/ mother rocker/ where mother rocked/ all the years/ all in black/ best black/ sat and rocked/ rocked/ till her end came/ [...] dead one day/ no/ night/ dead one night/ in the rocker/ in her best black/ head

fallen/ and the rocker rocking/ rocking away” (p. 281). In Billie Whitelaw’s delivery, with each line corresponding to another swing of the rocker, with the statuesque quality of her stance, with the selfless tone of her utterance, and the silent cry of “her famished eyes”, the final effect is mesmerising.

Rockaby shares with *Footfalls* not only their being ‘memory’ pieces¹⁵, but also their being based on similar visual metaphors. Billie Whitelaw when talking about the play (i.e. *Footfalls*) describes how Beckett used to sketch her during rehearsals, erasing here, adding there, till he was pleased with the curve of her arms, the turn of her head, the folds of her rags, then he used to tell her: “Now don’t forget that you’re a walking painting, a statue come to life”¹⁶.

However there is a remarkable difference that shapes the final response. May in her incessant dragging not only creates her own scenic stage, as opposed to W’s immobile attitude, but as this endless shuffling parallels the continuous flow of words that conveys her desire of becoming one day her own mother — their very names, May and Amy, are a clear signal in this direction— we realize that May stops one step behind W, who having sat down in the rocker, in her best black, forgone all hope and discarded all desire, has become “her own other self”, her own dead mother.

Rockaby then “speaks directly to the mind” with its shattering contents, but its richness also appeals to all our senses. Watching this play on the stage is like attending a festival of the most significant performing arts. We have already commented on the statuesque quality of the sitting figure, on the pictorial component present in this black and white sketch, we would like, finally, to extol the fine music inherent to its lines. Critics have praised its excellent “oboe-like winding”¹⁷, that makes it “a piece of chamber music”¹⁸, I would like to point to the combination of hard and soft sounds¹⁹, the balance of lines internally overlapping, the gentle rhythm of its highly poetic sounds that aurally reproduce the visual rocking of the chair and make the play a most memorable and hypnotic experience.

The same musical quality is found in Beckett’s next play, whose very name is a hint towards this interpretation: *Ohio Impromptu*. When in 1981, to celebrate his 75th birthday, the organizers of a Beckett Seminar at Ohio State University, approached him asking for a new play to be performed at their meeting, the playwright obliged —after much writing rewriting and correcting— by sending them, ten months, and three versions of the play later, its final copy²⁰. No wonder then, bearing in mind the definition of ‘impromptu’ —“A certain type of artistic creation, musical or literary, intended to produce the illusion of spontaneous improvisation”— that Alan Scheneider, its first director, remarked at the première²¹, of the play: “I think the title is sort of interesting. I believe it is a Beckett’s first ‘place’ name. And I think there is a bit of a joke in it.”²².

Pierre Astier in his article on this play²³, refers to other famous impromptus connected with other ‘place’ names, such as, for example Molière’s *Impromptu de Versailles* (1663), Giraudoux’s *Impromptu de Paris* (1937) and Ionesco’s

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Impromptu de l'Alma (1955), and comments on the fact that Beckett's work differs from them in as much as it contains neither a defence of his own aesthetics nor a "virulent attack against his critics", but he also points to the fact that *Ohio Impromptu*, like its predecessors, uses the metatheatrical dimension to deal to a large extent with the problems of writing a play. This is, obviously, a very valid interpretation of what would then be Beckett's 'swan-song', but to my mind it would restrict the universal scope of the play by reducing its theatrical image to depicting only the playwright's experience.

The poetic image Beckett has given us this time is that of two old white-haired, black-coated men, "as alike in appearance as possible", who, with half-hidden faces, sit in utter exhaustion at a table, as reflected images of the same object. The man on the left reads aloud from a book, the other one listens silently, knocking every so often on the table signalling when Reader has either to repeat a line—in performance strong, demanding knuckle-tap—or to proceed with the story—softer knock this time²⁴. The play has been defined by Ruby Cohn as "a tale within a tale within a play"²⁵, and within the semiotics of the piece the story read by Reader, and enacted by both of them becomes, at a given moment, the play we are watching.

The reading begins with the foreboding "Little is left to tell" and concludes with the definitive "Nothing is left to tell", in between we are told "a sad tale" of frustration and isolation. Once again in Beckett we are faced with the disassociation between figure and voice, between the one who speaks and the one who listens; Krapp meets his 'doppelganger' trapped in that "spool" regardless of the passing of time and its effects upon our unreliable memory; May and W listen eagerly to their 'alter ego' the former pacing wearily her strip of light, the latter rocking herself into death; while Winnie, Mouth and Speaker let their inner self free in a tumbling cascade of sounds while denying either the truth behind their plight, or their connection with the suffering soul. This split between speaking and listening, so characteristic of Beckett, has been dramatized for the first time.

In *Ohio Impromptu* both the famished ear and the babbling mouth have materialised upon the stage while performing to each other the "sad tale" of their lives. Reader tells Listener about a man who "in a last attempt to obtain relief moved from where they —(i.e. that man an "the dear face")— had been so long together to a single room on the far bank." (p. 285). His attempt at conquering some felicity unfortunately proved ineffective, as "the dear face" had already warned him with unspoken words, and now in the clutches of his old terror, with worse "fearful symptoms" than ever, he spends his days walking in his "long black coat" and "old world Latin Quarter hat" and his nights craving for "dawn of day" —David Warrilow, following Beckett's stage direction, at this precise moment turns the page with such a slow sweeping gesture, which will be repeated when closing the book at the end of the play, that we have the feeling that time also moves with his hand.

The long black coats they are wearing and the black wide-brimmed hat at

the centre of the table help us to make our first connection between the visual and aural images. However the strongest moment of recognition comes when the 'story-within-the-play' catches up with what we see on the stage "On night as he sat trembling head in hands from head to foot a man appeared to him and said. I have been sent by —and here he named the dear name— to comfort you. Then drawing a worn volume from the pocket of his long coat he sat and read till dawn." (p. 287) As in the case of *Rockaby* this is a mesmeric moment in which we are caught between the web of the complex semiotics of the play. To equate the identity of Reader with that of Listener's 'doppelgänger' —"With never a word exchanged they grew to be as one."— changes our perception of the second half of the play, as we realise Death has left the dark corners of the unlit stage and entered their circle of light.

A second subliminal shift in time now takes place in the narrative sequence of the embedded text. The actions Reader is telling Listener about no longer refer to the past —as in the first movement— or even to the present moment —as in the second one— but now in the last chords of this sonata, time is the future. "Till the night came at last when having closed the book and dawn at hand he did not disappear but sat on without a word. [...] So the sad tale a last time told they sat on as though turned to stone." (p. 287). Because we know that this is the only passage left to enact, and, therefore the one that will end this present reading of the tale.

Now, as present has merged into future, there is no more time left, no more "sound of reawakening", no more thoughts. Reader and Listener will be "buried in who knows what profounds of mind. Of mindlessness. Whither no light can reach. No sound." reaching that state when, at long last, the voice inside our mind is definitely silenced as "nothing is left to tell."

The piece shares with other previous works by Beckett, not only that musical quality already mentioned, but also a pictorial element²⁶. In some instances the creature on the stage may remind us of a painting by Edward Munch or Francis Bacon, in others the oniric image recalled is one of Dali or Magritte, but in the case of *Ohio Impromptu* we only find the peaceful and quiet atmosphere of a 'chiaroscuro' by Rembrandt or one of the other Flemish artists; the contrast between the visual and the aural image becomes thus even sharper and more poignant.

In performance the smooth rendering of the tale is only broken by the rap on the table. The rest is grave dignity in the voice —that in the case of David Warrilow, and according to Michael Billington "seems to contain its own death rattle."²⁷— and measured control in the action —which is reduced to Reader turning one page, Listener knocking on the table twelve times, Reader slowly closing the book, and Reader and Listener lowering, at the end of the play, their right hands while raising their heads to look at each other. One wonders what Beckett would think about a Los Angeles production, set after the Ohio version, that "had more realism and humour [...] with Reader amusingly impatient at Listener's interruptions and requests to repeat

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sentences already read", because even if, as the scholar pointedly remarks, "these two different productions vindicated (paradoxically) the richness of Beckett's writing in these highly compressed works of his old age"²⁸, one cannot forget Beckett's dogged refusal to change a single dot in his works.

This richness can also account for the different interpretations the play has been given; from presuming the play "would indicate the days of fiction and/or poetry writing are over"²⁹, to concluding "the play is more particularly about marriage or friendship and about one's partner's hungry, urgent need for the other."³⁰ To my mind, the play would hint at the impossibility of retracing one's steps to amend past errors, at the solitude inherent in our human condition, at the unbridgeable abyss open between the hand that gives and the one that receives, at the need to look our 'alter ego' in the face, and, especially, at the impeding threat, but also liberation, that the incessant passing of time implies to our ephemeral lives; because, soon, as there will be nothing left to tell, our life will come to its close.

Being reduced to a condition in which there is not 'anything to tell' either is also the protagonist's plight in Beckett's next piece: *Catastrophe* (1982). Here a furcoated, cigar-smoking director —D.—, bullies and bellows at his assistant —A.—, while putting the final touches to a live exhibit. The 'thing' they are going to show is the moulting, ashen, shivering figure of a man who stands on a pedestal clad in a long black coat. This sharp, powerful visual image, with its many shattering echoes, immediately fills the stage.

The peremptory producer questions every single item in the display — "Why the plinth?", "How is the skull?", "Why hands in pockets?", "How are they?"—, while shouting for more white on the "cranium" and on the hands, a higher pedestal, and more flesh to be shown. Only when he reckons that the final effect —of deeply moving the audience— will be accomplished, does he announce: "There's our catastrophe.", and ends in a boastful cry: "Terrific! He'll have them on their feet. I can hear it from here." (p. 301). But Beckett has not ended his play yet. The subservient, trembling, smitten figure, that shade of a man, that prop, who has allowed being handled like a puppet, now, once he is shown to the world, dares to enact the very action the director had purposefully specified twice he should not do: raise his head. P. (Protagonist) lifts his head, fixes the audience, challenges their clapping and commands their silence with the cold look in his eyes.

Due to the fact that Beckett contributed this piece to the 1982 Avignon Festival, and that it was dedicated to the eminent Czech playwright Valclav Havel, who is proscribed and has been imprisoned for several years because of his dissident activities, critics labelled the play as a political piece, and interpreted it only as an accusation against those totalitarian countries that thwart the freedom of their artists. Reviewers hail halled this 'new' tendency in the master³¹, who, according to them, had correctly discarded his solipsistic minimalist pieces to deal with a wider and more crucial issue³².

Others saw in the Protagonist's ordeal a metaphor about the world of the

theatre³³. The image refers thus to the way the act of creating is clumsily manipulated by directors, assistants and technicians, while the playwright has to assist impotent at the painful destruction of his work. In both interpretations the final aim is to control the audience's response, be it either by moving them to compassion and horror, or by forcing them to accept what they have been shown. To my mind both these ways of looking at the play are perfectly valid, as both worlds —that of politics and that of the theatre— are called to mind here, but they should not exclude each other, on the contrary, they should unite their strength to increase the potential of this powerful piece.

I would think that *Catastrophe* is an indictment against totalitarian regimes that wear their artists out till they lose their sting —“Sure he won't utter?”, “Not a squeak.” (p. 299)—; “a parable about the obscene commercialisation of suffering”³⁴; an accusation against public institutions —hospitals, prisons— where, in the sacred cause of public health or general order and security, the will of patients and inmates is bent a little more every day —maybe P.'s clothes are a hint in this direction. But *Catastrophe* also points an accusing finger at all those who attempt to control culture in general; at those autocrats who shout their orders ignorant of the real issues, and whose empty concoctions are fed to the masses; at any power that restricts the freedom of artists, that gags their mouths³⁵; at any sort of manipulation in the communication; and, by implication, at any kind of power, control, belief, fear, threat..., that may, in any degree, hinder our right to our own ideas and their expression³⁶; and, we must not forget Beckett's last warning against our yielding to such a situation.

Much has been said and written about that challenging final gesture, when the hapless creature dares to lift his head, and silences the clapping and cheering of the tamed audience by staring at them. Beckett himself instructed Alan Schneider that it should not be “in abject, pleading supplication”, therefore we might conclude that this is the affirmation of a man who, after being reduced to ashes —the colour of his “night attire”, his “cranium”, his hands, and finally, of his whole body, as the authoritarian director has ordered “Whiten all flesh”—, still finds enough fire inside himself to brave the world with his stare.

If the richness of the play has been the cause of so varied and different interpretations, the final effect is multiplied in production. Thus, for example, the assistant may look like “one of the women who attended Jesus at Golgotha” —such was the case of the French production³⁷—, or, to the reviewer's shocked surprise, “clip-clop around the stage on disturbingly erotic stiletto heels —sex in Beckett!” —as happened at the Edinburgh Festival³⁸. Understandably enough, the critics may either receive the play as “an excellent study of power and terror using the theatre as a metaphor.”³⁹, or as being little more than “the cliché image of the inmate of the concentration camp” —in the case of P.— and as an “old-fashioned concept of a tyrannical Hollywood director... which gives Beckett's contemporary metaphor the look of a 1920s cartoon” —in that

of D.—⁴⁰. However for us the play will be another important catalyst for our minds, and in this instance, also our social conscience.

If the highly poetic nature of Beckett's plays accounts for the multifarious interpretations his lines have been given, in the case of the playwright's latest work, *What Where* (1983)— in which action and words have been reduced to a kaleidoscopic repetition of similar patterns—, the final effect is even more puzzling and bewildering, and so are the interpretations of it.

From that seminal work — *Waiting for Godot*— in which critics saw the dramatization of our human condition, a religious allegory, a clear allusion to France occupied by the Germans..., in sum, "a sort of living Rorcharch text"⁴¹, to *What, Where*, scholars have been busy trying to capture the essence of his works, and in this last piece the playwright, with typical Beckettian humour, has challenged everybody with the two final sentences: V. (Voice): "[...] Make sense who may./ I switch off." We shall do our best to follow the connecting thread and try to get to the core of this disturbing labyrinth.

In this new piece Beckett insists on the theme of torture, but in contrast to *Catastrophe*, here we are not presented with the suffering of a single human being, but with a full scale purge. The threatening and disturbing atmosphere is created by the setting, with its two playing areas —one a rectangle, the other the spot occupied by a small megaphone—, 'dimly lit', 'surrounded by shadow' and 'general dark', together with the Dantean presence of four Druid-like men who enter, exit and re-enter, obeying the orders shouted by V. (Bam's voice) from a megaphone placed at 'head level'.

From the very first lines in the play we are aware of the fact that V., like the 'standard lamp, skull-sized white globe, faintly lit' in *Piece of Monologue*, symbolizes an entity which is both connected to the other elements in the play, and also independent of them. It could be compared to D in *Catastrophe*, the director/god-like figure who controls everything. In a ritualistic sequence the four characters on the stage —as opposed to V's definitive assertion in the first line: "We are the last five"— perform a choreographed set of movements which are repeated four times. "First without words", as V has ordered, later "with words", as he then commands.

The words, exactly the same in the three different instances, tell us of somebody who refuses to "say it", he wept, he screamed, he begged for mercy, and he passed out under torture but did not confess. In each instance the subject to be questioned varies —first Bom, then Bim, and finally Bem—, but each time, after failing to give a satisfactory answer, he is threatened with the same kind of punishment —in Beckett's American expression full of black humour— "you'll be given the works until you confess". This well ordained pattern of entrances and exits, repetition of action —first in the 'dumb-show', later accompanying it with words—, exact delivery of the same questions asked by Bam and the answers given by the other three, when their turn arrives, creates an image of the cyclical element in any political persecution, and is most disturbingly broken at the beginning of the fourth time, when, instead of

Bom reappearing, so the play —as in many other instances in Beckett— could begin again, Bam takes the place of the accused one⁴². We may venture at this point that maybe Beckett wants us to deduce that even the President of this Grand Inquisition will one day be called in front of V —his own voice— to be questioned on what? and where?, and that the only truth they will extract from all that questioning is the one V tells himself —and Beckett has been repeating from his very first work— “Time passes. That is all.” (p. 316).

What, Where is one of Beckett’s most bewildering plays. It was first performed at the Graz Festival in 1983, in German translation, and then on June 15, that same year, in New York, in English and directed by Alan Schneider; the British première took place at the Edinburgh Festival on August 13, 1984, performed by the same American company —the Harold Clurman Theatre—, who thus payed homage to their director, killed in a tragic accident in London early that same year. Critics, in utter confusion, defined it as “a little Chinese puzzle”⁴³, or rejected it altogether for its lack of definite answers⁴⁴. I believe that we can only try to see Beckett’s message in this play, by relating it to the previous works in his canon.

We have learnt, for example, that in his minimalist pieces every single component, including the exact number of dots he has included, has a crucial part to play. The same kind of microscopic analysis is the one to carry out in *What, Where*. We have already pointed to the difference inherent in the way characters hold their heads, but we must not forget either the constant crossing of light and dark areas —which, as we are aware, in Beckett usually imply the passing of time—; the disembodied voice that, like Mouth in *Not I*, has a life of its own; the fact that the four characters, like Listener and Reader in *Ohio Impromptu*, are “as alike as possible”, is Beckett implying that they are all parts of the same self? As always in Beckett, nothing can be taken as a definitive truth, we are left wondering, and in this instance, even more baffled than on other occasions, because in *What, Where* we are not even told what the questions the torturers ask are. Again and again Bam inquires “He didn’t say it?”, or “He didn’t say where?”, but no conclusive answer is supplied to satisfy our whetted curiosity.

However, if, as in the case of *Catastrophe*, we do not restrict the total image of the play to the portrayal of only one concrete issue —in that instance the political aspect of the play—, but, we give it a larger scope, then the piece stands out as a situation valid for any of us as human beings. The answers Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom failed to give when made to do so by V, —who like Opener in *Cascando*, starts and closes the play whenever he wants to (“I switch on”, “I switch off”)— mirror our incompetence when trying to solve the mysteries our human condition presents to us. Obviously in *What, Where*, as in real life, the very questions do not find their fullest expression because we, limited creatures, are not even aware of what these are. Generation after generation, in endless circles men have toyed with the same unanswerable philosophical riddles, and in each new cycle, no matter the pressure, the torture

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and the insistence, the only conclusion has been "Time passes. That is all." To me Beckett's almost last line written so far—"Make sense who may." (p. 316)—, does not refer so much to his play, —to which, knowing his subtle sense of humor, it evidently applies⁴⁵— but to our plight in this world. He is challenging all of us to make sense of our lives, of our ephemeral existence in a universe, whose answers, if there are any, will always remain hidden, because we do not even know the exact questions.

Beckett's last line: "I switch off", pointedly hints not only at the end of the Kafka-like questioning, and at his stopping V's voice in the play, but, maybe, also at his quietening his own as a playwright, and at his —and our?— receding into darkness and solitude, at the close of our days, without knowing the right answers as to what? and where?.

In performance, *What, Where* probably lacks the hypnotic quality of *A Piece of Monologue* and of *Rockaby*, the striking theatrical image of *Ohio Impromptu* and *Catastrophe*, but this latest play —with its tale of unknown horrors, of torture and suffering, that are cyclically repeated without the hope of change or escape because to our utter despair we are not even asked the complete questions— is, once we have fully grasped its meaning, one of Beckett's most vivid nightmares. A piece that will haunt us while we live in this world trying to make sense of it all.

Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *What, Where* in *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p.316.
2. As I explain in my next section, *A Piece of Monologue* was performed for the first time in New York only in December 1979, and in Great Britain as late as August 1984. Moreover this play, due to its theme and general technique is clearly connected with the other four plays.
3. Mell Gussow, *New York Times*, 19 December 1979, as quoted in Virginia Cooke, *Beckett on File* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 160.
4. Samuel Beckett, *Piece of Monologue* in *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. 265. Subsequent references appear in the text.
5. Kristin Morrison, "The Rip Word in *A Piece of Monologue*," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (September 1982), pp. 349-354.
6. Malcolm Hay, "Happy Birthday Beckett," *Plays and Players* (June 1986), pp. 5-6.
7. The first London production took place at the National Theatre (Cottesloe) on December 12, 1982, and on BBC 2. only three days later.
8. Martin Esslin, "*Rockaby*," *Plays and Players* (February 1983) pp. 33-34.
9. In a review of the play, Harold Hobson refers to the fact that "the diamond in her hand still has a glitter." *Times Literary Supplement*, (17.2.82)
10. See his very interesting article: "Light, Sound, Movement, and Action in Beckett's *Rockaby*," *Modern Drama*, Vol. XXV, No. 3 (September 1982), pp. 342-348.
11. Lawrence Graver, quoted by Beryl Fletcher and John Fletcher in *A Student's Guide to the Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985). p. 243.
12. Stanley Kauffman in *The Saturday Review*, (June 1981), pp. 62-63.
13. Beryl Fletcher and John Fletcher, op. cit., p. 244.
14. Quoted by Beryl Fletcher and John Fletcher, op. cit., p. 244.
15. There May, the protagonist, listens to her Mother's voice, another 'M-other' as Enoch Brater has remarked, recanting their past.
16. These were Billie Whitelaw's words when addressing those attending a 'Conference on Beckett' that took place on 11-15 August 1986 at Stirling University to celebrate Beckett's 80th birthday.
17. Stanley Kauffman, op. cit., p. 62.
18. John Russell Taylor, *Drama*, No. 148 (Summer 1983), p. 38.
19. For a most interesting and detailed analysis of this feature, see Enoch Brater's article —see footnote No. 10-, pp. 346-347 in particular.
20. For a detailed analysis and an interesting comparison of the different versions see the final chapter of *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives* edited by Morris Beja et al., (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1983). In this work we can find the most illuminating articles contributed at the meeting at Ohio State University.
21. The world première took place in Columbus (Ohio) on May 5, 1981; and the British first performance was on August 13, 1984 at the Edinburgh Festival.
22. Quoted by Pierre Astier in "Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu*: A View from the Isle of Swans," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (September 1982), pp. 331-341.
23. See note No. 22.
24. The knock here prompts the action (i.e. the flow of words) like the goad in *Act Without Words I* and II, the bell in *Happy Days*, the light in *Play*, and the word 'More' in *Rockaby*.
25. Introduction to *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*, op. cit., pp. 14-15.
26. In a well-known anecdote Billie Whitelaw refers to this characteristic in Beckett's style: "When rehearsing *Footfalls*," she says "Beckett suggested to me that maybe the theatre wasn't the right place for his work any more, that perhaps, if people were ready to see a walking

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- painting, an art gallery would be better". Billie Whitelaw in an interview with Heather Lawton — *The Guardian*, (January 29, 1986).
27. *The Guardian* (17.8.84).
 28. Susan Brienza, as quoted by Beryl Fletcher & John Fletcher, op. cit., p. 253.
 29. Pierre Astier, op. cit., p. 336.
 30. Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, (15.8.84).
 31. One wonders about what other, but a political, interpretation could be given to characters as 'old' as Pozzo, and Hamm, to 'mise-en-scènes' —for example: *Endgame*, *Happy Days*...— that, by accurately recalling the aftermath of a nuclear war, warned against it; and, after all, isn't P. a clear descendant of Lucky?
 32. They also alluded —see, for example John Peter's review in *The Sunday Times* (19.8.84)— to the interesting fact that Beckett and Pinter —in *One for the Road*— had both, finally, "extended the taut techniques of a private art to a public subject".
 33. In this respect Martin Esslin even restricts more the scope of the play by defining it as an "ironic image of Beckett's own experience of being a writer": *Plays*, Vol. I, No. 8 (September 1984), p. 28.
 34. Michael Ratcliffe, *The Observer* (19.8.84).
 35. With a very good touch of exaggerated outrage Beckett makes the director dismiss in utter horror the assistant's suggestion —A: "What about a little... a little... gag?". D: "For God's sake! This craze for explicitation! Every i dotted to death! Little gag! For God's sake!"— (p. 299).
 36. For a most elaborate and controversial exegesis with clear Christian undertones, see Antoni Libera's "Beckett's *Catastrophe*" - *Modern Drama*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 3 (September 1985), pp. 341-347.
 37. Quoted by Beryl Fletcher and John Fletcher, op. cit., p. 261.
 38. Jack Tinker, *Daily Mail* (14.8.84).
 39. Michael Billington, *The Guardian* (15.8.84).
 40. Milton Shulman, *Standard* (29.8.84).
 41. Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
 42. By now we have already learnt the difference between a character who enters and stands "head bowed" (i.e. he will be questioned and tortured later), and one who keeps his "head haught" (i.e. he will be the torturer). In this particular instance Bam, significantly, "enters at W, halts at 3 head bowed" (p. 316).
 43. B. A. Young, *Financial Times* (15.8.84).
 44. See Catherine Hughes, *Plays and Players*, No. 360 (September 1983), pp. 44-45, and Sheridan Morley, *Punch* (5.9.84), p. 50.
 45. Billie Whitelaw recalls, for example, a telling anecdote about Beckett inserting the word 'lacrosse' in one of his plays "just because he liked the sound of it and because it conjured up the image of the cross". "Oh, God", said Beckett as he scribbled it in, "tomes are going to be written about this." (As told by the actress to Sally Brompton, *The Times* (9.1.86).