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“THESE OLD P.M.S ARE GRUESOME”:

Post-mortem Poetics in Beckett’s Late Plays

Samuel Beckett is often associated with lateness. He has frequently been classified as a late modernist. Books abound on his late style, on his late modernist style, his late fiction, his late plays. And indeed, it is especially the late Beckett that is equated with late modernism, or sometimes with postmodernism or with posthumanism. The late Beckett: the phrase lends itself to a potentially infelicitous pun that the interested party might not have disdained. One is reminded of Tom Stoppard’s philosopher George Moore in *Jumpers*, and his problems with the late Bertrand Russell:

I do not propose this late evening to follow my friend Russell, this evening to follow my late friend Russell, to follow my good friend the late Lord Russell, necrophiliac rubbish! ... my very old friend - now dead, of course - ach! (Stoppard 2013: 8).

Like Stoppard’s Moore, I do not intend here to discuss Beckett’s ontological lateness, although in his case the *calembour* on death is actually more appropriate than embarrassing, not because, like Lord Russell, Beckett is “now dead, of course”, but because so much of his so-called late work has itself to do with death or with dying, with being or about to be late. Beckett in this sense was not at all scandalized by the necrophiliac, or at least the necrologic.

In addition to lateness, Beckett has also been associated with lastness. Anthony Cronin and others have defined him as the last modernist, and lastness, like lateness, is itself a recurrent theme in Beckett, from “the last at last seen of him” in *Murphy* to *Krapp’s Last Tape* to Beckett’s anecdote in his last interview with Mel Gussow (1989, p. 61): “They’re all dead. ... I’m the last”. This paper addresses lateness and lastness in Beckett’s drama and in particular his last play, *What Where* (1983). *What Where* is a play that has much to do with both lateness and lastness. It is likewise a play that raises more specifically the question of its own late or last or post modernism, and possibly of its post humanism.

The questions raised by *What Where* begin with its intriguing title, a paradoxically affirmative interrogative, lacking a question mark. Thereafter, the play is probably best

remembered for its first words and for its last words. The play begins with a kind of ending, with lastness. The enigmatic opening line “We are the last five” immediately raises the question “who”, despite the fact that the pronoun “who” is missing from the title: who is speaking, who are we, the last five of whom or what? It poses, in other words, the question of the play’s subject, both in its grammatical and in its thematic sense. The line may evoke survival after some apocalyptic scenario, along the lines of Mary’s Shelley’s *The Last Man*, or possibly of Beckett’s own *Endgame*. Or it may more mundanely signify that the five are the last of an unidentified series. The second line, instead, with its somewhat antique rhetorical inversion – “In the present as were we still” – seems to imply non-survival: it can presumably be paraphrased “as if we were still in the present”, or alternatively “in the present, as if we were still [alive]” (with the verb in the subjunctive). We are the last five but we are no longer in the present, or we are in the present but no longer “we”.

The play’s oft-quoted last words also allude to lastness and to ending:

V: Time passes.

That is all.

Make sense who may.

I switch off.

[*Light off P.*

Pause.

Light off V.] (Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 476; all references to Beckett’s plays are to this edition)

The play’s final line, “I switch off”, is accompanied in performance by the dimming of the spotlight on P., the player alone on stage. Switching off, both verbally and visually, is the technological equivalent to the traditional curtain fall, and as such it recalls the endings of earlier Beckett plays, such as the finale to *Krapp’s Last Tape* in which Krapp, recording what is possibly his last tape, suddenly “switches off, wrenches off tape, throws it away”; or *Play* which ends with the “spot off M. [Man] Blackout”, or *Catastrophe*, the play written immediately before *What Where*, which concludes with “*Fade of light on face*”. There may be other implications to the switching off, as we will see.

The text’s notorious penultimate line “Make sense who may” – which has given the title to a book (Davis and Butler, 1989) and several articles on Beckett – again raises the question of the subject. It explicitly introduces the relative pronoun “who” for the first time, instead of the titular “what” and “where”, but in this case it appears to refer not only to the subject of the play but also and especially to the subject of its reception, of he or she who is able or authorized to make sense of it (“who may” with its implication of authorization, not “who can”). As such, it is a challenge launched to audiences (who probably do not need it, having done nothing so far but struggle to make sense) and, perhaps, to actors, directors and even to critics and scholars. The latter, critics and scholars, have not been slow to take up Beckett’s hermeneutic gauntlet, the invitation to

make sense of the play, which they evidently feel authorized to interpret. The text thus poses the metatextual issue of its own meaning, while at the same time it defies interpretation, since "who may" sounds suspiciously like "who dare" (make sense who dare). Beckett himself subsequently underlined his resistance to the interpretation of his pièce. In an earlier 1983 interview with Mel Gussow, Beckett famously protested "I don't know what it means. Don't ask me what it means. It's an object." (Gussow 1996: 42). Beckett refuses to take up his own hermeneutic challenge, or perhaps does not consider himself authorized to do so, despite his authoriality. This is a favourite Beckettian ploy from *Godot* on: namely, to invite and at the same time refute all interpretative endeavor. Nevertheless he does, despite himself, provide a clue of a kind: it, the play, is an object, not a subject, or perhaps has no subject. The penultimate line may also, finally, have a wider referential catchment area as an invitation or challenge, Beckett's defiant last authorial word, that can be extended retrospectively to his dramatic and literary canon in general. Making sense of the "who" in *What Where* thus involves a broader problem of subjectivity in Beckett at large, especially the "late" Beckett.

The potential dramatic subjects of *What where* are four or perhaps five. The list of Dramatis personae of *What Where* presents four figures – characters is hardly the right word - BAM BEM BIM AND BOM together with the VOICE OF BAM (V) which is the dominant presence on stage through its megaphone. V is evidently included as a separate dramatis persona or, perhaps, dramatis impersona: "We are the last five", not four. It is V who pronounces the opening and closing words, while the silent BAM, alone on stage, is lit and unlit. BAM would appear to be the likeliest candidate as speaking and acting subject, both through his continuous bodily person and through his voice, although the two are separated. The question is complicated, however, by the multiplicity and by the virtual identity of the BM figures, described by Beckett in his opening note:

Note

Players as alike as possible.

Same long grey gown.

Same long grey hair.

V in the shape of a small megaphone at head level. (469)

The physical and phonetic identity or near-identity of the BM figures corresponds to their similar roles in the dramatic and stage action. BAM interrogates BOM BEM and BIM in turn about the torture he has inflicted on one of the other two BMs in order to get him to say first "what" and then to say "where". Not only the signifieds of what and where but also the signifiers, the two pronouns themselves ("what and 'what'; where and 'where'"). All attempts fail, and lead to the punishment of the unsuccessful torturer. The BM figures thus exchange roles as torturer and victim respectively. The

verbal and stage routine is the same each time, with variations only in the cardinal points from which each figure enters and exits (respectively North, East, West), in the season (respectively spring, summer, autumn, winter, in the canonical order), and in the word to be confessed, first what, then where.

Interpretations of the play and its subject or subjects have fallen broadly into two schools of thought, the political and the psychological. Responses to early productions of the play tended to stress the political issues that are undoubtedly potentially present in the text, associating it with *Catastrophe*, the dramaticule with which it was performed in its British premiere at the 1984 Edinburgh Festival. A good deal of subsequent critical commentary has likewise identified the "what" of the play with political torture, and has even occasionally hazarded an identification of the where, namely eastern Europe or alternatively Turkey (encouraged by Beckett's apparent intention in his 1986 Stuttgart production, to have each figure wear an Armenian Tarboosh, and his invitation to the actors to "think of the political situation in Turkey" [Gontarski, 1987, 121]). This reading interprets the multiplied or fragmented subjectivity as a splitting into active and passive agency: BAM and the voice V on the one side, BOM BEM and BIM on the other. The primary subject becomes collective, namely the state or some political organ thereof. The most categorical subscriber to this reading is Damien O'Donnell, director of the 1999 *Beckett on film* version of the play, who affirms emphatically:

The whole play is about power and the abuse of power, and how information is power, so we used the library as a metaphor for somebody who has control of all the power and all the information ... *What Where* is about a brooding, palpable evil, which is a theme that occurs in Beckett's other work (O'Donnell 2014).

O'Donnell's somewhat Orwellian reading of the action is clear in his production not only in Bam's imperative interrogating voice but also in the choice of Doctor-Who-like science fiction costumes. The setting, a sanitized library with illuminated bookcases hosting identically bound volumes, suggests an institutional context, while also emphasizing perhaps, in addition to the control of power, the play's own bookish textuality (indeed, the production begins with the wind-swept pages of an open book). There is little suggestion here of any identity between Bam and the other Bm's, who seem to represent not a fragmented subject but rather a binary division between subject and object.

The *Beckett on film* production, nevertheless, does perhaps authorize a reading of the play as a re-embodiment of the late modernist or postmodernist subject. As Anna McMullan observes, "The repetition or play of 'simulacres' not only destabilizes ontological certainties or hierarchies, but is also a means of foregrounding space itself, the unfigurable absence of centre or 'self' which challenges and redefines the limits of representation", (McMullan, 1993, 44). BAM and company with their metallic voices and their repetitive automata-like discourse and movement take on a certain robotic or

cybernetic quality, as if they inhabited the realm of “embodied virtuality”, as N. Katherine Hayles calls it in *How We Became Posthuman* (1-24). This reading corresponds to what has been called the posthuman turn in recent Beckett criticism. Jonathan Boulter, for example, affirms that “Beckett's characters may be posthuman but they are not fully postcorporeal” (Boulter 2013, 15), a description that might well fit O'Donnell's version, in which the figures of the last four or five appear to have a marginal humanity but a still more or less intact corporeality.

A very different reading of the play appears in Beckett's own tv adaptation *Was wo*, which he co-directed for the Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1986. We might call the recording of *Was Wo* Beckett's last tape. In his production there is no setting, just the all-encompassing darkness familiar from other dramaticules, while the physical form of the dramatic figures is radically changed with regard to Beckett's original opening stage direction, being reduced to bodiless post-corporeal faces. As Stanley Gontarski observes: “Instead of players in long gray gowns, their own corporeality suspect, the four figures of the revised, television *What Where* now appeared as floating faces dissolving in and out [of the light] ... What characters, what bodies, finally exist in *What Where* are created by voice, less absent presences than present absences.” (Gontarski 2001, 176). In this version the line of demarcation between BAM and the others, and between subject and object, becomes far less well defined. BAM and company floating on and off the screen are not embodied virtuality but disembodied ethereality, while the voice of V is not metallicly cybernetic but atonally otherworldly.

Nevertheless, the attempt to make sense of Beckett's revised version, by those who may or who dare, has generally involved the attempt to find at all costs a recognizably human “who” as well as a well-defined thematic “what”. A good example is Enoch Brater's account in *Beyond Minimalism*:

On television *Was Wo* turns inward, personalizing and depoliticizing the stage play even further. Torture becomes more explicitly self-inflicted, a function of memory, remorse, and the relentless need to tell a story. ... We concentrate not on a repeated body movement but on a held facial expression. Heads imply a mind and the hell that lies within (Brater 1987, 162)

This seems a perfectly reasonable affirmation, and indeed it is quite legitimate to read *What Where* as a kind of psychodrama. The danger, however, in this approach lies precisely in its attempt to restore or reconstitute in Beckett's play a kind of modernist subjectivity, fragmented but in the end unitary, a single mind inflicting torture on its own dissociated parts. There seems to be something a little perverse in the attempt to redo via critical interpretation what Beckett has so strategically undone in his texts, as if to deny the disquieting force of Beckett's scattered or shattered personae, and thereby save the reassuring humanistic organicism of the represented character. BAM becomes a singular psyche divided between warring versions of himself. A similar restorative reading has characterized the critical approach to other dramaticules, notably *Not I*, which has often been reconstructed by critics as the troubled autobiography account by

Mouth, subject of her own narration (see Elam 1986). Again there is something incongruous if not paradoxical in the insistence on the "I" in *Not I*, as if to impede what Beckett calls Mouth's "vehement refusal to relinquish third person" (375). Not I - Yes, you! Mouth's resistance towards the I -- and thus to confessing her identity -- is recalled in *What Where's* avoidance of "who" and the BM's refusal, even under torture, to say "what" or "where". There is a flight from subjectivity in these plays. And there is, especially, a flight from unified subjectivity. The multiplication of identity in the four BM's, like the multiplication the voices speaking to listener in *That Time*, suggests a fragmenting of the subject that is not necessarily re-composable into a singular "who" or "what" or even "where".

In this context it might be well to recall Derrida's caveat regarding interpretative readings of Beckett in general:

The composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of his works, even the ones that seem the most "decomposed", that's what "remains" finally the most "interesting", that's the work, that's the signature, this remainder which remains when the thematics is exhausted (and also exhausted, by others, for a long time now, in other modes) (Jacques Derrida 2002, 61).

Derrida, therefore, warns us against the thematic reconstruction of Beckett's deconstructions or decompositions, and advises us to content ourselves with the trace, the signature that remains after interpretation has failed.

Regarding the interpretation of *Was Wo* it is not necessarily true that Beckett's television production of his own play is offered as a psychodrama figuring a mind and the hell that lies within. The audience's experience of the production is not that of recomposing the pieces of a the puzzle into a guiding self, but, more probably and more simply that of wondering what and where the speaking heads are doing and saying. On the what, as we have seen, Beckett is reticent, but on the where he remarked during work on the production that the Voice of Bam could be thought as coming from "beyond the grave" (Knowlson 1996, 686). This posthumous state might also be applied to the decidedly ghostly floating and speaking heads on the screen, whose material physicality seems at best precarious.

The semantic paradigm of the posthumous finds confirmation in the play's last line. "I switch off", as well as indicating closure, is a ready trope for an ending of another kind, namely death. As such V's "I switch off" is the last in the series of what we might call Beckett's famous last words, final lines which seem to suggest the death – in progress or imminent or having already taken place – of the protagonist. *That Time* ends with "gone in no time" (395): "go" and "going" and "gone" are in Beckett recurrent synonyms for die, dying and dead. *A Piece of Monologue* concludes with "Alone gone" (429), *Rockaby* with the death-wish, the Schopenhauerian *noluntas* that is everywhere manifest in Beckett's late plays:

fuck life

stop her eyes
 rock her off
 rock her off (442; on Beckett and *noluntas* see Orlandini, 2015)

“Switch off” may be, therefore, like “go” or “gone” or “rock off”, a variation on what Beckett in *A Piece of Monologue* calls the “rip word” (429), in the sense of death word, the r-i-p word, rest in peace, *requiescant in pace*, even if Beckett’s dramatis personae are never in peace. *What Where* may thus be one of the gruesome pm’s or postmortems referred to prophetically by Krapp (“these old post-mortems are gruesome”, 218). This suggests a quite different post-human scenario from O’Donnell’s futuristic library with its cyborg creatures. Beckett’s figures are post-human to the extent that they are posthumous, in the etymological sense of last, or of coming after (from *posterus*, posterior), after death, perhaps after the death of the world, or after the death of humanity, of the very possibility of subjectivity and are thus beyond the sphere of human agency. We are the last five. This also places them beyond the bounds of modern, or late modern, or post-modern subjectivity. They are simply post. “The danger”, as Beckett warns us in his early essay on Joyce, “is in the neatness of identification” (“Dante”, 19), and these critical categories may attempt too neat an identification, or at least a classification.

Of course, to consider Beckett’s late or last creatures as posthumous, perhaps obliged to carry out gruesome self post-mortems is no less an interpretation than to consider them as parts of a mind or as victims of political oppression (although these interpretations are not necessarily reciprocally exclusive). The ‘post-mortem’ reading opens up other possible hermeneutic vistas. The floating heads of *Was wo* may, for example, be imprisoned in a Dantean landscape, as Beckett himself seems to suggest in his last interview with Gussow:

[... it might be] about a place without issue. No exit. The four [Bam, Bom, Bim, Bem] are trapped. One by one they have an opportunity to ask the victim what where, and they receive no answer. If they did, perhaps they would leave ... (Gussow, 1996, 43)

This suggests a possible clue in locating the where of *What where*, namely in some infernal *huis clos*, not unlike the dark Dantean non-spaces of *Play* or *Not I* (see Elam 1994). The BM’s, from this perspective, may be condemned to the eternal repetition of interrogation and reciprocal torture, and to an endless switching on and switching off.

If nothing else, the posthumous or post-mortem reading does place in question Beckett’s supposed representation of the modernist or postmodernist subject, or of subjectivity *tout court*. Nevertheless, this interpretation, like others, still responds to the desire for recomposition and to the imperative to make sense rather than allowing ourselves simply to be seduced, as Derrida advises us, by “the composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of his works” (Derrida 2002, 61), their signature. John Calder suggested that *What Where* belongs to the group of texts that he termed

"Beckett's ghost period, where phantoms that echo the haunting quality of memory and nostalgia in his work are seen or described on stage" (Calder 1983, 219). To identify the figures in the play as ghosts, however, may raise as many questions as it seems to solve. Or better, it raises questions precisely in the attempt to find a definitive and, in the end, reassuring solution. What does it mean to identify Beckett's figures as ghosts? Are they to be seen as revenants, back from the dead? If so, in what sense can they be said to be "back"? And back where?

On this matter, it is difficult to avoid quoting Derrida again, and in particular the questions he poses in defining his concept of "hauntology" in *Specters of Marx*: "What is a ghost? What is the *effectivity* or the *presence* of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there *there*, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time." (Derrida 1994, 10, my emphasis). The effectivity or the presence of Beckett's creatures is precisely the problem (what where?). Hovering between first time, repetition and last time, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, they seem to defy identification. Perhaps we should leave them there, suspended in the suggestiveness of Beckett's affirmative-interrogative title, with its missing question mark.

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