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The Country Wife.
Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

Edited by Alba Graziano

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SIMONA BRUNETTI*

Corey Wakeling. *Beckett's Laboratory. Experiments in the Theatre Enclosure*¹

Abstract

In *Beckett's Laboratory. Experiments in the Theatre Enclosure*, Corey Wakeling proposes an original approach to Beckett's dramaturgical work, demonstrating that his writings for the theatre self-consciously use the theatre as a laboratory for investigating the theatrical representation in the 20th century. The key elements of his argument are very simple: first, to clear up the misconceptions about Beckett's attitude to experimental theatre; second, to identify his views on modernism; finally, to revise the concept of his authorship. The core work of the book is then divided into seven closely related chapters that explore different aspects of the argument: use of pantomime; sensory deprivation; symbolist inheritance; dream space; spectacle and politics; hypnosis; adaptation. Focusing on the philosophical underpinnings of Beckett's practice and his practical approach to playwriting, an eclectic mix of plays and their corresponding theatrical productions are examined in detail. This dense and original study sheds new light on Beckett's dramatic work with a particular emphasis on the plays of the late period. By reconsidering this approach to stage directing and the innovative representation of humanity that emerged in his stage practice, the author of this book reassesses Beckett's dramaturgies as compositions essentially intended for performance. Although provocative in relation to a more traditional critical view and, at times, extremely careful to bring out different aspects and alternative interpretations of his latest dramaturgy, Wakeling's analysis is particularly compelling regarding the process of formal experimentation that underlies the Irish playwright's dramaturgical creation and indirectly offers an entirely new perspective on his theatrical production.

KEYWORDS: Beckett; late dramas; laboratory; experimentalism; performance

Corey Wakeling is currently an Associate Professor at Kobe College in Japan. In *Beckett's Laboratory. Experiments in the Theatre Enclosure*, he revises and enriches, on the one hand, the fruits of a passionate and meticulous doctoral research project on "Samuel Beckett and Experimentation", conducted from 2010 to 2013 at the University of Melbourne School of Culture and Communication under the primary supervision of Peter Eckersall and the secondary supervision of Clara Tuite; on the other hand, he collects and develops under a coherent vision some essays developed from his thesis and already published in prestigious international reviews from 2015 to 2017.

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The scope of Wakeling's study is explicitly stated from the outset: to propose a novel and original approach to Beckett's dramaturgical work, demonstrating that his writing for the theatre treats the theatre as a laboratory of performance. Starting with Latour and Woolgar's definition of the space of a human workshop ("an enclosure where previous work is gathered"), the author of this volume provides at the outset the definition to which he refers throughout his discussion: "a theatre laboratory tends to stand for theatre in a state of progress", it is a space still to be defined.

The key elements of his argument are briefly outlined in his *Introduction*, entitled *Performativities of the laboratory* (1-21), in which he first clears the field of misconceptions about Beckett's attitude to influential figures and body practices in experimental theatre in the decades after the Second World War. Far from being the writer's sole imaginative domain, Wakeling explains how much Beckett's approach to dramaturgy was, from the outset, experimental and capable of indeterminacy. For him, the Irish writer's well-known remarks against theatre or performance laboratories like Grotowski's should not be taken as definitive statements about dramaturgy, while his negative attitude towards experimental performance does not necessarily imply the absence of an inherent experimentalism in his writing. The secret of Beckett's worldwide influence and success, even in the visual field, lies more in formulating an influential dramaturgical experiment than in advocating a coherent dramaturgical theory. To make this point clearer, the author of this volume finds it particularly useful to analyse the origins of two short plays, *Actes sans paroles I* and *II* (*Act Without Words I* and *II*), to show how Beckett uses cage scenarios to explore the limits of logic and utility, as the two plays for mimes were designed to observe human performance in the context of both Wolfgang Köhler's ethological laboratory work and Ludwig Wittgenstein's enclosure in language.

Secondly, in his *Introduction*, Wakeling considers the category of experimentalism in relation to aesthetic theories and modernism before attempting to define his notion of Beckett as an experimentalist. After identifying the two main views in the relationship between experimentalism and modernism – experimentation as the pinnacle of aesthetic autonomy or as a means of undermining it – the author presents the discussion that has arisen around Clement Greenberg's concept of medium refinement, particularly in the direction taken by modern performance practice: the freedom to experiment. Suppose the Adorno-derived view of Beckett's theatre tends to dissociate it from the political experimental practices of the theatrical avant-garde. In that case, Wakeling aims instead to show how the Irish author's dramaturgical writings are deeply intertwined with these practices and cannot be understood without them.

Finally, the author explains his guiding idea in considering Beckett's theatrical production as an experimental compositional mode of composing, referring to what 'remains' to be revealed in composition rather than to pre-determined ends of art. Indeed, from his point of view, it is a negative process rather than a negative vision that underpins his writings. To resist reading the Irish playwright's plays as the result of a predetermined aesthetic orientation towards the spectacle is to revise the concept of his authorship. This way, Wakeling proposes an unusual way of understanding the author's creativity.

The core investigative work of the book is then divided into seven closely related chapters that explore different aspects of the argument.

In the first chapter ("Laboratory Acts Without Words", 23-48), the author focuses on the two parodic pantomimes *Act Without Words I* and *II*. Both written before 1956, they were conceived in close association with the Irish author's two most critically acclaimed plays: *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) and *Fin de partie* (*Endgame*). On the one hand, for Wakeling, this inexplicable connection is a sign of Beckett's special attention to pantomime in the 1950s and, on the other hand, of a particular experimental turn to the diagram in his dramaturgy. The author demonstrates how diagrams serve as an important tool in the playwright's recent works, also proving valuable for directors and actors during performances. Following this, the volume explores the complexities of contemporary pantomime and the resulting paradoxes brought about by metamimicry in a more thorough and persuasive manner. At the end of the chapter, the two facets of the argument come together in a sharable final observation: Beckett's theatre shows that when no one believes in mime any longer, the modalities of the discipline can come to stand for the raw facticity of the subject's nonetheless ongoing practice of self-simulation.

The second chapter is devoted to "Sensory Deprivation" (49-72). The author refers to the plays written for Billie Whitelaw, the actress whom Beckett considered his Musa and the best interpreter of his late dramatic works, written after the 1960s: *Not I* (1972), *Footfalls* (1976) and *Rockaby* (1981). Drawing attention to the actress's experience of dizziness during the rehearsal of *Not I* and her subsequent fainting spell, Wakeling aims in this chapter to show how the performance of Beckett's plays written after 1960 requires a performer who is an athlete of subtraction, adept at enduring the fatigue of stasis. The author contends that in plays crafted for Whitelaw, Beckett aims to gauge the impact of sensory limitations on audiences. For instance, in *Not I*, where a mouth speaks rapidly in a black field, this requires a specific physical effort and reconfiguration of bodily energy. This, Beckett believes, prompts the audience to engage with spectacles highlighting the connection between the corporeal and incorporeal, as seen in *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*. These unveil a ghostly figuration through physical

enactment, revealing a dimension not previously explored through lighting or storytelling, as initially seen in the 1963 production of *Play*.

In the following chapter ("Impediment and the Symbolist Dramaturgical Inheritance", 73-96), Wakeling makes an excursion into the artistic and literary currents active in the period in which Beckett's first dramatic compositions were written in order to show how a greater understanding of the material practice of the Parisian theatres of the time, a combination of epic theatre and post-surrealist metatheatrical theatre, is also necessary. Beckett's rejection of a certain type of realist theatre seems to have been motivated by a desire to create new access to the audience rather than by the dream of symbolism and its impossible enterprise of simulation through negation. The Irish author's resistance to realism cannot be the only vector for identifying echoes of symbolism in his production. In fact, from the author's point of view, Beckett's resemblance to Symbolist dramaturgy conceals an unresolved materialism and not the extension of the trajectory of abstraction argued in detail by critics of the past. Wakeling's idea is, on the one hand, to propose an expanded theory of the Irish playwright's theatre that includes the insensate and insensible dimensions of stagecraft, design, and concept as dimensions of the materialism of the stage and, on the other hand, to explore the human figure as a uniquely theatrical creature, neither mere concept nor human.

In the fourth chapter ("Dream Space, the Other Laboratory", 97-108), special attention is given to all the plays in which the sleeplessness motif is present in one way or another. The dreamscape of Beckett in performance can be read as an allegorical representation of an inverse side of the dialectical spectacles of unconscious human life, realised in the material gesture of 'sleeplessness.' Thus, rather than locating voice and text as the infinite domain within states of absolute sleep or void, the late Beckett instead constructs anatomies of dreamscapes and their gesture. Indeed, Wakeling argues that Beckett's figures "existing at the edges of sleep produce gestures that expose the emergence of once-solitary spaces of interiority to a representational field". To explore this theme further, he suggests that we begin by analysing the entanglements in which Sleepless intervenes as a rejection of the main conditions and goals of sleep: rest and death. The dreamscapes in his dramaturgies can be read as allegorical representations of dialectical spectacles of unconscious human life. In this way, the late Beckett constructs anatomies that retain the inescapable signs of a self-visibility on the verge of disappearance. He uses gesture as a primary means of notation, referring to the difficult location of sleep, gestured by characters who remain sleepless as long as they are visible. In several dramatic cases, such as *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *That Time* (1976), or *Happy Days* (1961), the dream is the setting or condition of the characters. In all these cases, waking life is presented as an interruption of the apparently more receptive state of

sleep, and the urge to perform is linked to the will to live. The dream thus becomes a context for reaching out to an inaccessible self that disappears into the realm of the unconscious.

In the fifth chapter ("Catastrophe and the Politics of Spectacle", 109-24), the author of the book focuses on the politics of Beckett's theatre in the context of the late 1970s and early 1980s theory of negation and the human. Wakeling traces the convergence of political-aesthetic ideas in the work of Marcuse, Beckett, and Havel as a common opposition to the dehumanisation of the ideological spectacle. For him, however, Marcuse's account of the Beckettian concept of hope is deeply negative and is demystified in his use of it to articulate the political power of literature. Through a detailed analysis of the play *Catastrophe* (1982) – which employs a deconstruction of the spectacle – and the Havellian notion that the human is the locus of dissent, Wakeling can observe in context how an experimental process of dramaturgy that deduces what remains of the human also deduces what remains of dissent as a result. The catastrophe referred to in the title is the catastrophe of appearances. The play is dedicated to Havel as part of a larger protest against his house arrest for political activities opposing the Czechoslovak state. In the scenario of the play *Catastrophe*, there is no hope of dissent: human subjects are shaped into life as uncritical objects of one-way contemplation. Therefore, the catastrophe in the play is not Havel's arrest but his absence from the stage – the development of an authoritarian ideological scene in the place of dissent. Beckett seems to imagine what removing figures like Havel from the stage might do. Havel's arrest means Havel's absence, says Wakeling, "leaves a void to be occupied by the exhibition of desubjectivised life". While *Catastrophe* proves to be an affirmation of Havel's view of dissent as a matter of enduring humanity, the play also offers many interrelated concepts about the ambiguous nature of hope. In particular, Wakeling argues that the Beckettian experiment realises an anti-ideological counterclaim of stage and gestural formulations.

More interesting, in our view, is the sixth chapter ("Hypnosis: a Theory of Beckett Spectatorship", 125-46), in which the plays already analysed from the actor's point of view in the second chapter are now re-examined with a different methodology that privileges the act of spectatorship and the hypnotic ends of the experiments carried out on the stage. The idea that the immersive experience of the vertiginous aspects of these plays gives special value to their affective construction is already present in the premises of sensory deprivation. In this chapter, Wakeling, drawing on personal experience, combines strategies of immersive dramaturgy with the attention to manipulation techniques used in psychoanalysis and clinical therapy sessions to address the issue of hypnosis in Beckett's stage writing. The hypnotic effect, Wakeling claims, emerged as a result of many events in

the course of Beckett's stage career: the varied success of pantomime and mime artists; a changing, escalating use of the stage diagram; an increasing separation between the performer's body and the soundscape; a deeper engagement with the paradoxes of the unconscious. Furthermore, the author of the book argues that to understand the kind of attention required in this latest dramaturgical production, it is necessary to refer to the application of the three dynamics of attention: reflexive, automatic, and voluntary. Without an emphatic spectatorship, though, the subjectivities conceived by the Irish author cannot appear at all. Then, the spectator who accepts to be part of such hypnotic representation as those proposed by the characters in *Not I*, *Footfalls*, or *Rockaby*, registers a sensory confusion induced by the sensations and echoes of memory that they produce and becomes responsible for a personal 'recomposition' of perceived rather than seen affects.

The Seventh and final chapter ("Adaphatrôce", or the Contentious Fringes of Beckett's Dramaturgy", 147-68) deals with the adaptation for the stage of some of Beckett's narrative texts, with his consent and, at times, also with his collaboration. Adaptation, says Wakeling, proves to be one of the most controversial and least coherent topics of Beckett's dramaturgy studies, not least because of Beckett's well-known preoccupation with it. He even described adaptations of his prose works as 'adaphatrôce', an atrocity in his evocative word, yet he allowed many of them to go ahead. However, Wakeling's main point is how these plays underline the Irish writer's interest in experimenting with theatrical practice. Adaptation is a reflection on one's writing in the light of the latest dramaturgical creations. How contemporary theatre companies and artists have engaged in major revisions of Beckett's dramaturgies through careful interrogation of the medium and composition has led to a new and heightened focus in their interpretation and significant performances. Indeed, a more enduring interpretation of the ability of Beckett's dramaturgy to cross-medial divisions is guided by artists sensitive to compositional problems such as the practices of diminution, negation, and focalisation. In this regard, the chapter also pays particular attention to Peter Brook's work as a director and his staging of *Fragments*, a series of plays by Beckett. Although both Brook and Beckett return to the essence of the stage, a cornerstone of their dramaturgy, the process of deconstruction they put into practice is very different. Wakeling argues that Brook's adaptation ignores Beckett's characteristically ambivalent dramaturgical practice. Although Brook's practice is essentially based on refined pantomime, and Beckett explicitly uses pantomime as a means of experimentation, the former trusts mimesis while the latter questions it.

At the end of the book, the Notes (169-92) are followed by an extensive and accurate Bibliography (193-204) and finally by an Index of names and works cited (205-13).

In conclusion, Corey Wakeling's creative, dense, and original study sheds new light on Beckett's dramatic work and his inventive approach to writing for the stage, with particular emphasis on the plays of the last period. By reconsidering the Irish playwright's approach to stage directing and the innovative representation of humanity that emerged in his stage practice, the author of this book reassesses Beckett's dramaturgies as compositions essentially intended for performance. Although provocative in relation to a more traditional critical view and at times extremely capable of bringing out different aspects and alternative interpretations of his latest dramaturgy, his analysis is timely and compelling about the process of formal experimentation that underlies the Irish playwright's dramaturgical creation and indirectly offers an entirely new perspective on his theatrical production.

