
Samuel Beckett: bat-eared; tow-haired; thin-skinned; wrinkly; wearing round metal-framed sunglasses. His head seems to float centre stage, illuminated under the spotlight. The image is an iconic study on the front cover of *Borderless Beckett*. J. M. Coetzee suggests in the first essay of the book that eyes ought to mirror the soul but this man is an enigma. In his uncertainty Coetzee speculates on eight shades of the author: the philosopher, endlessly trying to negotiate the absurd duality of the mind/body split; the misfit; the over-adapted and doomed Western bourgeois male; the pawn of some malign intelligence, like Captain Ahab’s Moby Dick; the lab rat or monkey working out the system of rewards; God’s marvellous plaything; the mundane non-professor of Italian; the enigmatic photograph. He comes to judgement:

photographs of Beckett show a man whose inner being shines like a cold star through the fleshly envelope. But soul can shine through flesh only if soul and flesh are one. If soul and flesh belong to distinct realms, and their conjunction is an everlasting mystery, then no photograph will ever tell the truth. (31)

This dark theatrical photograph of the author is mounted against a stark white cover and the titles are blood red. The symbolic resonates with Médecins Sans Frontières. Beckett’s art crosses borders – philosophy, literature, media, culture – and takes a scalpel to the human condition. This new generation of scholars hails from around the world and is moved to count the ways, in the unity of their interest in Beckett’s works. *Borderless Beckett: Beckett sans frontières*, is a selection of revised papers from the first Beckett symposium held in East Asia (Tokyo) in October 2006, sponsored by the 21st Century COE Institute for Theatre Research at Waseda University and the Samuel Beckett Research Circle of Japan. There are thirty-five papers – twenty-four in English and eleven in French – and three photographic essays. The format of the written papers is standardised to a short abstract in English followed by a piece of around 6,000 words in length – easy bites. The offerings provide rich pickings.

Motivation for the gathering coalesces around Beckett’s centenary in 2006 and the anniversary of the first encounter of the Japanese public with his work. The backstory is that in 1953 a young scholar, Shin’ya Ando, witnessed the première of *En Attendant Godot* in Paris. He returned to his graduate school of Waseda and translated the play into Japanese for publication in 1956. Subsequently he directed the play for the Bungakuza theatre company which effectively launched the avant-garde Underground Theatre Movement in Japan.

This compilation is prefaced by a series of black and white photographs of a performance of Noh players inspired by Beckett’s television plays. These shots are taken by Futoshi Sakauchi and form part of the closing ceremony at the symposium. Allusions are made in the introduction to parallels between the works of Beckett,

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W.B. Yeats and the influence of Noh theatre. In this performance veiled figures trace the parameters of a geometrical grid – pace with insistence – and this sense of ritualised action engages speculation on the plane of philosophy and religious fervour driven by a sense of caged impatience. A second series of urban-scapes, ‘Impressions of Tokyo’ by Sjef Houppermans, presage an illuminating section in the book called ‘Television’s “Savage Eye”: Phantasmagorical and Virtual Bodies’. From a literary and theatrical base Beckett’s work with images and montage makes the crossing to modern filmic media. At the beginning of the last section, ‘Borderless: Life and Death/Beginnings and Endings’, are three studies from Endgame. Toru Tezuka plays Hamm and Akira Emoto plays Clov. The focus is on the quirky duo of characters and the dependent relationship.

In Chapter Two Steven Connor writes that the Other is our border and checkpoint and Beckett demonstrates that solipsism is not allowed. We only exist in the ‘thinness of things’. Life has finitude. But Evelyne Grossman writes of the modern tendency to subsume the world outside into an elastic self. The Other becomes part of me and in this longing for union and resistance to separation we are mad. And Masako Kondo writes about the Japanese special concept of ma. This is the brief interval of inaction, the blank/blink between illusion and perception. The eye of the mind must work to fill the silence. In material dimensions ma is the measure of the stage used for the ritual dance. Beckett asks for the grace to know this void and such allowance is happiness, in reverence. Garin Dowd talks about the architecture of space with an emphasis on the dislocations between the margins of the wasteland and the centre of the house. He talks about the careering pathways between locations, separations, openings, thresholds, passages, superimpositions, enclosures and interpenetrations. There may be obstacles but one stubbornly persists in walking east, away from the sinking sun.

In the next section Bruno Clément studies the voice as the irreducible figure that says something about the doubleness of aesthetic production and utterance. He proposes new criteria between literature and philosophy. Anthony Uhlmann writes about resonating images as the impression of the truth and the call to understanding. The intellect is challenged by haunting. The experience is both physical and mental. Paul Sheehan uses Beckett to show how the author lays the groundwork for the Sixties generation of thinkers. He explores the dialectic between image and voice, as peculiarly situated in the common concerns of Bataille and Blanchot. The figures of silence – death, indifference, contestation, non-knowledge – manifest in the gap. Beckett is ‘the poet of silence, the peerless exponent of literary negativity, and the provider of a fiction-orientated paradigm for the theory to come’ (122). Michiko Tsushima explores Beckett’s interest in the Augustinian idea of memory and Anzieu’s concept of ‘the Skin Ego’ as a physical container, a sac where subjective experience is stored – sensations, images, affects – in such a way that they are neutralised and preserved (131). And Yo Fujiwara asks why we should go on telling and listening to stories when the fictional narrators are so out of sync with their own narratives. This is a silly question, he admits, when black humour and laughter make such good medicine.

Clowns and artists, humans and animals, virtual reality and stones, this is a Beckett emporium awaiting consumption so long as the eyes hold out. Then Mireille Raynal-Zougari writes of the virtual universe formed inside the Beckettian cranium. Everything in the outside world is doubled in art. She writes that Beckett’s media experiments reproduce a chain of images. But eventually these images devolve into one, the image that started it all. But the text and the image somehow do not match. Anne-Cécile Guilbard looks at...but the clouds... a theatre piece adapted for television as...que nuages... She asks: ‘qui voit quoi où?’ (Who sees what where?) and interrogates the conditions of an image’s visibility and the gap between the visual and the literary image.

There is more. Chris Ackerley considers how puns, allusions and other linguistic paradigms constitute points of resistance to cultural transference. Takeshi Kawashima examines both Joyce and Beckett’s naming strategies, finds the humour and asks if names destroy individualism. He suggests that ‘Beckett’s names are the signs of the ambiguous relations between individual and community’ (335). Izumi Nishimura confronts the simple egg-head/ball in Unnameable and Textes pour rien and concludes that Beckett has an introspective imagination. His hypothetical subjects observe their own consciousness and adopt the outsider’s point of view.

Julia Siboni defines the Beckettian subject as being strung between the poles of ‘unspoken words’ and ‘murmurous silences’. Jonathan Tadashi Naito explores the historical antecedents in Beckett’s early mimes. Manaka Ono reconsiders the concept of ‘absurd’ as generally understood in Beckett’s work and studies the disruptions in Actes sans paroles 1 and 2. She sees a similarity to morality plays. Things happen while we wait for the end.

In the midst of life we are on our way to death. Régine Bruneau-Suhas hits the nail on the head when she writes about the Beckettian landscape in the penultimate essay on Oh les beaux jours. Life’s daily rituals continue above ground within the scope of possibility, while Winnie commits herself to the earth, a slow interment, sinking the body until only the talking head remains.

Happy Days! Borderless Beckett returns the living dead for progressive critique in stimulating essay forms. Furthermore... and furthermore, this edition, Volume 19, is part of the Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui annual bilingual series. Volume 18 is called ‘All Sturm and no Drang’ and Volume 20 is Des éléments aux traces/Elements and Traces.

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