

IBSEN TO BECKETT VIA SHAW

Abstract

Excerpts from the paper

“One early and prominent comparator in the work of Ibsen, Shaw, and Beckett is that of gender, and I begin with this because it enables me to trace a progression in the course of Beckett’s writing. We are all familiar, of course, with the controversy Ibsen provoked as a result of his exploration of the roles and expectations allocated to women within the family and within society.”

“So how does Beckett fit into this pattern?”

“In the dramatic medium, where both women and men have access to first-person narrativity, the association of women with alterity is no longer consistently sustainable. Women and men are able to say ‘I’, or to resist saying it. In this context where gender is no longer, as it had been in the early work, a predictor of a repertoire of behaviours, the search for a self or selves broadens out and becomes available to searchers of male, female, or indefinable gender. The urgency lies not in preserving a self inviolate from other threats-to-self (such as women, policemen, relatives), but in locating a self able to voice that self and its parameters.”

“Out of these dilemmas a question arises: is there a self to be found at the heart of these experimentations? And, if so, how is it to be recognised?”

Bildiriden Parçalar

İbsen, Shaw ve Beckett arasındaki birincil karşılaştırılabilir ortaklık cinsiyet üzerindedir. Bildirime böyle başlamamın nedeni, bunun bana Beckett’in yazarlık çizgisini izlememe olanak sağlamasıdır. Elbette ki, Ibsen’in aile ve toplum içinde kadınlara yüklenen rolleri ve beklentileri araştırmasıyla kışkırttığı tartışmaya aşinayız.

O halde Beckett bu örüntüye nasıl uymakta?

Hem kadınların hem de erkeklerin birinci tekil şahıs anlatımına sahip olduğu dramatik ortamda, kadınların öteki olduğuna ilişkin ısrar artık ortadan kalkmıştır. Kadınlar ve erkekler „Ben“ diyebildikleri gibi, buna karşı da koyabiliyorlar. Cinsiyetin artık, eski oyunlarda olduğu gibi, davranışlar yelpazesinin habercisi olmadığı bağlamda, benlik veya benlikler arayışı erkek, kadın ve tanımlanmayan cinsiyette olanlar için erişilebilir hale geliyor. Gerekli olan, dışarıdan gelen tehditlerce (kadın, polis, akrabalar gibi) ihlal edilmemiş bir benlik muhafaza etmek değil, o benliği ve parametrelerini dillendiren bir benliği konuşlandırmaktır.

Bu ikilemden bir soru ortaya çıkıyor: Bu deneylerin tam kalbinde bulunacak bir benlik var mı? Eğer varsa, nasıl tanınacak?

SHAW DOLAYIMINDA
İBSEN’DEN BECKETT’E

MARY BRYDEN*

* Prof.Dr., Cardiff Üniversitesi / Samuel Beckett Derneği Başkanı

Prof.Dr., Cardiff University / President of Samuel Beckett Society

This year has been a year rich in international commemorations of Samuel Beckett, and, as a Beckett scholar, I have attended a good few of them. Some of them have had a very wide remit, such as the major conference in Japan last month, entitled 'Borderless Beckett'. This expansive title, as the Chair of the Beckett Circle in Japan pointed out, was intended to denote how the metropolis – or perhaps we should say megalopolis - of Tokyo provides a crossroads of Eastern and Western cultures and a melting pot for multiple manifestations of art and literature. Then, just two weeks ago, there was a much smaller gathering, at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, where Beckett taught English from 1928 to 1930. This was an important formative period in Beckett's intellectual development, and the conference focussed specifically on Beckett in the 1930s, a time when Beckett's years of intensive study and reading were forming complex undercurrents in his own nascent writing career.

This conference in Ankara has, I think, carved for itself a unique niche amongst these commemorative events. First of all, it is the only one to take account of the double anniversary occurring this year, the centenary of Beckett's birth, and the centenary of Ibsen's death. Secondly, it does so in a geographical and cultural space which invites the opening up of intersections such as these. I have just given examples of Beckett conferences in East and West (Japan and France). In Turkey, we may consider Beckett and his collocutors from a privileged space of dialogue, a country whose civilisation is historically and culturally at the heart of global exchanges and perspectives. So I am greatly looking forward to the new insights in Beckett and Ibsen Studies which this conference will generate over the next two days.

The conjunction of Beckett and Ibsen may seem at first sight to be an unusual one. An examination of the indexes of works on Beckett will uncover few references to Ibsen, and the same is true of works on Ibsen. Beckett was a five-week-old baby when Ibsen died in 1906 (23 May). Though Beckett was precociously intelligent, and could supposedly in later life recall life in the

womb, we cannot credit him with contemporaneous awareness of Ibsen! Nevertheless, as a young man he became very familiar with Ibsen's work, and attended some performances of Ibsen plays at the Abbey Theatre and the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin during the 1930s. There is not a great deal of extant commentary on his detailed impressions of Ibsen at this time, but sporadic references do enable us, I think, to piece together to some degree how Beckett was preparing his ground as a writer in relation to, and in contradistinction to, earlier playwriting forebears such as Ibsen, Shaw, or Pirandello.

As I examine Beckett's evolving literary strategies in relation to Ibsen, I would also like to use an intermediary figure whose anniversary also occurs this year. That figure is George Bernard Shaw, and this year, 2006, is the 150th anniversary of his birth. Shaw's long life, then – he died only in 1950 – straddles the lifetimes of both Ibsen and Beckett. Both Shaw and Beckett received the Nobel Prize for Literature when in their sixties; Ibsen never did. Shaw was 49 when Ibsen died; Beckett was 44 when Shaw died. This similarity in age is not, however, accompanied by a similarity in attitude. Shaw's admiration of Ibsen is not paralleled by an admiration of Shaw on the part of Beckett. Nevertheless, I want in this paper to draw out some comparable resonances in the oeuvre of Ibsen, Shaw, and Beckett, and also to suggest that Beckett's apparent sealing-off of his own writerly project from theirs is not perhaps as watertight as it might appear.

One early and prominent comparator in the work of Ibsen, Shaw, and Beckett is that of gender, and I begin with this because it enables me to trace a progression in the course of Beckett's writing. We are all familiar, of course, with the controversy Ibsen provoked as a result of his exploration of the roles and expectations allocated to women within the family and within society. Whatever Ibsen's personal views of gender roles – and he did state in an 1898 speech to the Norwegian Women's Rights League that his writing was fired not by what he called 'social philosophy' but by poetics¹ - his writing of plays such as *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* clearly dramatises a destabilisation of

¹ Speech of 26 May 1898, *Speeches and New Letters*, tr. by Arne Kildal, with an introduction by Lee M Hollander (London: Frank Palmer, 1911), p.65. Quoted in John Northam, *Ibsen's Dramatic Method: A Study of the Prose Dramas*, 2nd ed., (Oslo, Bergen, Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget, 1971), p.38.

Victorian domestic convention. Although, as J. L. Wisenthal points out,² it seems to have been *Peer Gynt* which *first* attracted Shaw to Ibsen, rather than *A Doll's House*, Shaw quickly responded to the latter play, defending it against its detractors. In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, he examines how ideals such as 'the sweet home, the womanly woman, the happy family life of the idealist's dream'³ are gradually undermined as disillusion sets in and shows them all up as façades. Yet, as Shaw points out in a later chapter, Nora's *prise de conscience*, and her consequent actions, are contingent upon circumstances. Her individual remedy is not a universally applicable recommendation. He writes: 'What Ibsen insists on is that there is no golden rule; that conduct must justify itself by its effect upon life and not by its conformity to any rule or ideal'.⁴

What Shaw praises in Ibsen's dramaturgy is not only its ideas but also its inclusion of what he calls a new 'technical factor' (*Quintessence*, p.171), that of discussion. He even employs a musical analogy in suggesting that the discussion adds to the drama what a new movement would add to a piece of music. *A Doll's House* is in his eyes a prime exemplar of this innovative tendency. Countering those critics who assert that discussion is inimical to drama, he argues that it is central to any play, and is even the 'main test' (p.171) of the playwright's skill. (There are those who would say that Shaw did not always pass this test!). Certainly his own drama is grounded in verbalisation of often sparkling quality, where wit is not an end in itself, but is made to serve the discussion. If Ibsen saw the political, including gender politics, as being bound up with the poetic, Shaw's drama throws in its lot much more overtly with the political. Hence, he embraces the gender debates engaged in by Ibsen, and makes them subject to extended analysis, both within on-stage discussion and in prefatory material. Within the decade following the first edition of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw produces play after play – Mrs Warren's Profession, *Candida*, *You Never Can Tell*, etc. – which, amongst other goals, seek in very explicit ways to expose inequalities and inconsistencies in gender relations.

² J. L. Wisenthal (ed.), *Shaw and Ibsen: Bernard Shaw's 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism' and Related Writings* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p.7.

³ George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 3rd ed., (New York: Hill and Wang, 1913), p.84.

⁴ 'The Lesson of the Plays', in *Quintessence*, pp.147-57 [pp.156-57].

This decade of playwriting culminates in perhaps the most striking example of all, which is *Man and Superman* (1901-02). This monumental play presents a sparring interplay between two strong central characters – the young woman, Ann Whitefield, and her legal guardian, Jack Tanner, a left-wing political propagandist who appears to be a confirmed bachelor. After a series of encounters, including a surreal journey through Hell under the alter egos of Don Juan and Dona Ana, Ann relentlessly though covertly pursues Jack until he finally capitulates to what he sees as inevitable and agrees to marry her.

So how does Beckett fit into this pattern? If we focus on Beckett's early work, which I am defining as everything from his early critical writing, poetry, short stories and novels up to the writing of *En attendant Godot* in 1948 to 49, we find that the predatory woman already described with reference to *Man and Superman* has many counterparts in Beckett. The central character of the early short story collection, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, for example, is a young man named Belacqua (his name borrowed from Dante's *Purgatorio*) who undergoes a series of romantic escapades with women. Three of these liaisons do culminate in marriage, although two wives go to an early grave and Belacqua himself dies at the close of the book, leaving the third wife on the prowl for a replacement husband. The male in this work, as in others such as the novel *Murphy*, is absorbed in an inner quest which for him is the highest priority and which women only serve to impede. He remains, however, caught in an unresolved dilemma, for he is wedded to his own solipsism while at the same time being fascinated by some of the females who encroach upon his space.

While the phenomenon of the predatory female is comparable across early Shaw and early Beckett, the outcomes associated with it are very different. For Shaw, the protestations of the male, while significant in themselves, are insignificant in the face of the greater power of the woman, to which the male eventually cedes his autonomy. Hence, *Man and Superman* ends with the stage direction: 'Universal Laughter'. Perhaps there is a

⁵ Bkz. Roswitha Körner /Horst Voormer, Theaterleksikon , (Hg.) Manfred Brauneck, Gerard Schneilin, rowohltts enzyklopädie 1993, S. 609 – 610

⁶ Bkz. Gerhart Ebert, 1993. s. 26

⁷ Bkz. Aziz Çalışlar, *Tiyatro Ansiklopedisi*, T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 1995 Ankara, s. 430-431

⁸ Kehty Johnstone nin geliştirdiği *Tiyatro Sporu* formunun mimus türüyle ilintili olduğu savı bana aittir.

Schopenhauerian quality to this laughter, having to do with the irreconcilability between ideal state and actuality. But there is certainly a brightness and optimism associated with it, as well. As Shaw once said in a letter to Max Beerbohm at around the time that he wrote *Man and Superman*: 'Nobody nursed on letters alone will ever get the true Mozartian joyousness into comedy'.⁵ Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* is in some ways comparable in that the Beaumarchais play on which is based ends with universal song and an atmosphere of merriment. Beaumarchais, like Shaw, presents individual misery on stage, but gathers it up into a dynamic and forward-bound deconstruction of society. It is on this basis that a contrast is sometimes adduced between Shaw and Ibsen, the former exuberant in his vision of a collective future, the latter pessimistic or at least melancholic in his vision of individual oppression. I think that there are problems in sustaining this contrast, but using it temporarily allows us to reconnect Beckett's work with that of Ibsen.

For the male protagonist in Beckett's early work, the prospect of cheerfully ceding autonomy to an intervening female initiative is unthinkable. In this he departs from both Shaw and Ibsen. He departs from the Shavian notion of participating in a project, colluding with the so-called Life Force rampaging in women, since to do so would be to betray the individual male impulse to solipsism. At this stage of his writing he may seem closer to Ibsen than to Shaw, since individual problematics seem to resist translation into public, collective arenas. Yet Beckett also departs from Ibsen insofar as his work simply does not place men and women on the same plane in terms of difficulties in reconciling ideal with actual, or role with real: in Beckett's early work, women are irrevocably other; they are troublingly embodied, and mostly aligned with matter rather than intellect.

What enables us to reconnect Beckett's project with that of Ibsen is to advance into the later period of his writing. Something happens in Beckett's work at the time when he begins to turn towards the genre of drama. By the late 1940s, the search for subjectivity had become something much more fluid and

⁵ Letter of 30 December 1900, quoted in Wisenthal, p.51.

experimental. Notably in the first two volumes of the Trilogy, *Molloy*, and *Malone Dies*, the narratorial voice had begun to take on different witnessing positions, radiating into alternative subjectivities, experimenting with pronominal identities, shuttling between first and third person, dissolving between names and rendering uncertain their attachments to identities. Within this provisional narratorial landscape, predetermined positions begin to fade, even those very tenacious ones which had attached to gender in Beckett's early work. And so, in the opening pages of *Malone Dies*, the narrator ruminates on the possibilities for onward progression: 'I think I shall be able to tell myself four stories, each one on a different theme. One about a man, another about a woman, a third about a thing and finally one about an animal, a bird probably. I think that is everything. Perhaps I shall put the man and woman in the same story, there is so little difference between a man and a woman, between mine I mean. Perhaps I shall not have time to finish'.⁶

When Beckett turns to theatre, this dismantling of gender stereotypes is further precipitated. In the dramatic medium, where both women and men have access to first-person narrativity, the association of women with alterity is no longer consistently sustainable. Women and men are able to say 'I', or to resist saying it. In this context where gender is no longer, as it had been in the early work, a predictor of a repertoire of behaviours, the search for a self or selves broadens out and becomes available to searchers of male, female, or indefinable gender. The urgency lies not in preserving a self inviolate from other threats-to-self (such as women, policemen, relatives), but in locating a self able to voice that self and its parameters.

Out of these dilemmas a question arises: is there a self to be found at the heart of these experimentations? And, if so, how is it to be recognised? Beckett broaches these questions memorably in his early work on Proust, written in 1930, where he states: 'The heart of the cauliflower or the ideal core of the onion would represent a more appropriate tribute to the labours of poetical excavation than the crown of bay'.⁷ In other words, recognition

⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, in *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979), p.166. First published as *Malone meurt* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1951).

⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Proust, and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1965), p.29.

of artistic or literary endeavour should be recognition not so much of a centred body of work, a completed product, but of the layers and segments through which the work has journeyed. This is as much as literary criticism can do, to observe directions and oscillations. It cannot through penetration find a centre or a key. There is no core to the onion.

This is of course a metaphor which Ibsen had already dramatised in *Peer Gynt*, a play with which Beckett was familiar. Across the episodic structure of the play, Peer excavates his experiences in search of the self which might inhere within them. In Act 2, the Great Boyg, who identifies himself as 'My Self'⁸ challenges Peer to assert his own selfhood. Later on, in Act 4, Peer looks wistfully at lizards scuttling on a rock, and envies them their uncomplicated selfhood: 'They are themselves' (PG, p.126). Ibsen's achievement in this play is to demonstrate a double consciousness, with spectators witnessing a succession of contrasting identities assumed and inhabited by a central character who will later proclaim himself unchanged. Yet the Thin Man informs Peer: 'Remember, a man may quite well be Himself in two different ways – he could be, as it were, the inside or outside face of the garment' (PG, p.217).

In contrast to this doubling, Peer had earlier asserted that 'I must be Myself en bloc' (PG, p.115). That selfhood conceived as a block, consistent and unchanging, is, however, exposed as being on insecure foundations. The most telling image of all occurs in Act 5, when Peer strips down an onion, skin by skin, seeing in each successive segment an element of his life. The segments differ from one another, the outer skin being battered, some of the layers being dried and devoid of resources. Other layers are luxuriously juicy, but bring tears to the eyes. Peer accelerates as he pulls away at the layers, exclaiming 'What an incredible number of layers! Don't we get to the heart of it soon?' (PG, p.191), only to find that there is no heart, there is no centre. 'Nature', he observes, 'is witty'.

⁸ Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, tr. Peter Watts (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p.77.

In Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape*, nature also outwits the male protagonist as the old man Krapp takes a banana from his desk drawer, peels it, drops the skin on the floor, eats the banana, and then trips himself up as he walks over the skin. (This opening stage business was omitted in the recent Royal Court Theatre production starring Harold Pinter). The banana, like Peer's onion, will participate in Krapp's negotiations between past and present selves. His liking for bananas has remained constant. When the on-stage Krapp, the sixty-nine-year-old, plays on the tape recorder the recording he made at the age of thirty-nine, he hears the younger voice announcing: 'Have just eaten I regret to say three bananas and only with difficulty refrained from a fourth'.⁹ The thirty-nine-year-old Krapp has also been listening to the recording he made ten or twelve years earlier. He is heard laughing mockingly at the aspirations that earlier Krapp had expressed on the tape, to drink less. 'Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp', he says (KLT, p.58). For a moment there is an uncanny complicity between the sixty-nine-year-old Krapp (who twice retreats backstage to pour himself a drink), and the thirty-nine-year-old Krapp, as they laugh in unison at the temperance resolutions of the twenty-something Krapp which are shown not to have borne fruit.

Yet other aspects of that earlier self are unrecognisable to the older Krapp. They include lexical competence. When the thirty-nine-year-old uses the word 'viduity' in relation to his mother, the sixty-nine-year-old has to look up the word to discover that it means the state of 'being – or remaining – a widow – or widower' (KLT, p.59). They also include the conviction, clearly perceived as a tiresome delusion by the later Krapp, that a new understanding, a new vision, has been achieved. In reaction to it, the sixty-nine-year-old Krapp confides to his tape recorder: 'Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that' (KLT, p.62).

I won't multiply the examples, since the play is well known, but what Beckett achieves here, through the intervention of technology, could be drawn into affiliation with Ibsen insofar

⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, in *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber, 1984), p.57.

as the voice-segments we hear are, like Peer Gynt's onion segments, present and distinct in themselves, but also shown to be simply provisional and time-dependent manifestations of the self. And, as the cluster of tastes, behaviours, competences and attitudes which we call the self transmutes, the spinal tap taken at a later date may reveal few of the allergies, poisons and gravitations which were present at an earlier stage. The question therefore arises: what is the status now of my all-consuming misery of the past? Has it evaporated? Was it really there in the way I remember it? Was I deluded in feeling it? Is it somehow sealed off, in a separate compartment of the self? Is it still part of the present, still organic, still exerting an impact on the swarm of intensities which constitute the present moment? Or alternatively, has it all shrunk back to an image, a cinematic segment of myself? Hence, the thirty-nine-year-old Krapp reflects: 'What remains of all that misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway-station platform?' (KLT, p.58).

The hope of the present moment also contains its hopelessness. The present and the future remain to be lived, but past opportunities cannot be re-grasped. Krapp deals with this defiantly as the play ends (though the tape runs on), by saying: 'Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back' (KLT, p.63). Krapp does not want the earlier years back. Yet in a sense they are already back; they have always been back. A version of them is all around him, in the tape boxes, successively reeled back to play back to the self which itself is playing itself out, performing itself. Peer Gynt, similarly, eventually finds himself playing for time, playing in and among time. Threatened by the Button Moulder with being melted down and recycled, he pleads: 'Dear fellow – just lend me myself, on parole' (PG, p.202). He doesn't recognise himself in the Button Moulder's rendition of his life, and requests a temporary self to inhabit, not recognising that the self he is peddling as habitual and dependable has always been temporary. So, like Krapp, he envisages clinging on in proximity to himself.

I think we need to remind ourselves at this point, however, that there are some differences between Ibsen's onion-peeling and that of Beckett. For Ibsen, there is horror and emptiness to be found as the onion segments fall away and reveal nothing at the centre. For Beckett, the contours are unfathomable and often eye-watering, but they can provide a recourse, even a kind of transient refuge. In Act 2 of *Peer Gynt*, the Old Man tells Peer that the difference between trolls and human beings is that the human motto is 'Man, to thyself be true', whereas the troll motto is 'Troll, to thyself be – enough' (PG, p.69).). The contrast is a challenging one for Peer, who scratches his head in puzzlement. Later on, when he meets Peer again, the Old Man confronts him with the observation: 'You've lived as a troll, but you kept it secret' (PG, p.206). Peer denies it, translating the trollish creed as being that of egoism: 'I – a hill troll? An Egoist? I?' (PG, p.206).

As enunciated by the Old Man, the distinction between the two modes of identity is clear. Yet are these two conceptions of the self mutually exclusive? It seems to me that, in some of Beckett's writing, they are drawn inextricably together. Towards the end of the first of the *Texts for Nothing*, the narrator states: 'I'm in my arms, I'm holding myself in my arms, without much tenderness, but faithfully, faithfully'.¹⁰ He has just evoked an absent father, a memory of walking along joined by the hand and yet each participant immersed in his own world. Now, on his own, he seems to have achieved a kind of synthesis of being true to a self – 'faithfully, faithfully' – and yet at the same time being self-sufficient – 'holding myself in my arms'.

Nevertheless, of course, this apparent intimacy goes along with a splitting of the self into two functional parts, one holding, and the other being held. Here, the division is, for a transitory period, fulfilling and even tranquil. At other times in Beckett, it is invested with urgent disquiet. Earlier on, I was suggesting that, in his later work, Beckett suspends and largely dissolves the stereotypical binary hierarchies attaching to gender which had characterised his early work. The result of this is that dilemmas, regrets, infirmities and decay assault both male and

¹⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, in *Collected Shorter Prose 1945-1980* (London: John Calder, 1984), p.74.

female, gender being contingent in terms of its occurrence in conjunction with these difficulties. Hence, in considering the refracting subjectivities, the uneasy accommodation to memory and desire, we may turn from Krapp's Last Tape to a play voiced by a woman, the play Not I. Here, the spotlight Mouth rehearses pervasive memories, of traumatic episodes, from childhood, from shopping expeditions, from appearing in court, and so on. The hectic delivery of this word-stream attests to its psychic urgency but at the same time to the disavowal of an author or first-person initiator of these events. In a narrative recounted in the third person, and punctuated with scream and exclamation, Mouth recurrently arrives at the point where she is on the brink of saying 'I'. In a panic-ridden short-circuiting of this impulse, she replaces it with 'No!...she!'.¹¹

As any Beckett actor, spectator, or director knows, this text is among one of the most difficult ones amongst Beckett's oeuvre to perform. Made up, as it is, of evocations of individual unhappiness and troubling interactions with others, many actors feel driven to draw up a kind of checklist of symptoms, and from it to manufacture a psychobiographical dossier, prompting them to speak from a position, a defined position, a pathological position. This is precisely what Beckett resisted. In 1972, the American director Alan Schneider flew to Paris with Jessica Tandy, the actress who had distinguished herself in a large number of contemporary plays by writers such as Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee. She was about to appear in the world première in New York of Beckett's new play, Not I. During that meeting, Tandy irritated Beckett by asking questions about the supposed background to Mouth, such as the precise nature of the event in the field which had traumatised her. Had the woman been, for instance, raped?¹²

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, Not I, in *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber, 1984).

¹² See James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p.591.

¹³ No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider, ed. Maurice Harmon (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.279. Letter of 3 September 1972.

Later in the autumn, Schneider wrote to Beckett with a number of questions which had arisen during rehearsals. The first was: 'We're assuming she's in some sort of limbo. Death? After-life? Whatever you want to call it. OK?'¹³ Beckett's reply is revelatory. He writes: 'This is the old business of author's supposed privileged information [...]. I no more know where she is or why

thus than she does. All I know is in the text. “She” is purely a stage entity, part of a stage image and purveyor of a stage text. The rest is Ibsen’ (Harmon, p.283).¹⁴ What does Beckett mean by this remark? I would suggest from the context in which it occurs that there are two possible grounds for Beckett’s self-distancing here. The first has to do with authorial ignorance and impotence. Beckett repeatedly asserted his conviction that the artist – at least, the kind of artist he wanted to be – is what he called ‘a non-knower and a non-caner’. His plays are simply there. Like the wild onions which Peer Gynt seeks, they have developed by layering and segmentation, but there is no central or originating point which would provide a key to them. What Beckett dissents from is what Ibsen might have seen as his role – not the only role, but an important one - to communicate an awareness, and, more particularly, as Theoharis puts it, to supply a ‘prophetic, foundational critique of those actions that middle-class culture promised would end in well-being’.¹⁵

The second way in which Beckett is differentiating himself from Ibsen here is, I think, by refusing to supply for his characters (and hence for his actors) an anterior background (familial, psychological, or social) which might in some sense explain or justify their later thoughts and behaviours. Certainly he presents us with the walking wounded, or the stationary wounded – and the Woman in Not I is one of these - but the cause, progress and after-effects of those wounds are left unexplicated. In discussing Ibsen, Michael Goldman suggests that the psychic undertow of Ibsen’s plays may usefully be approached by identifying the ‘spine’ of the play, where ‘spine’ is defined as ‘a formula that attempts to express the unified movement of purpose that presumably informs a play, some common thrust underlying the projects or dominant motivations of its characters’.¹⁶

For Beckett, there is not and never can be any ‘common thrust’, or ‘dominant motivation’. As he famously said of Endgame, again to Alan Schneider: ‘Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together as stated, nec tecum nec sine te, in such a place, and in such a world, that’s all I can manage, more than I could’ (Harmon, p.24).¹⁷ His inability, then, fifteen years later, to provide clues for

¹⁴ Letter of 16 October 1972.

¹⁵ Theoharis C. Theoharis, *Ibsen’s Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996, 1999), p.60.

¹⁶ Michael Goldman, *Ibsen: The Dramaturgy of Fear* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.16.

¹⁷ Letter of 29 December 1957.

Jessica Tandy as she faced the daunting task of preparing Not I, is entirely consistent with his earlier stances. Alan Schneider's reply to Beckett, a few days later, has a certain defensiveness about it. He writes: 'Do understand. Maybe American actors, or some American actors, most notably "stars", tied to certain psychological configurations, no matter how much they might wish it otherwise'. He stresses to Beckett that he had already presented to Tandy the model of Eugene O'Neill rather than that of Ibsen: 'Jessica very nervous and not yet settled down, but has moments of real effectiveness, especially today after she had read your letter and realised I had not been leading her astray, although I had said O'Neill rather than Ibsen to her over and over again' (Harmon, pp.284-85).¹⁸

I have dwelt on this specific instance of Ibsen being put forward as a contrastive set of practices since it bears importantly on Beckett's conception of his own dramaturgy. However, I have suggested earlier in the paper that we can also discern connectivity in Beckett's response to Ibsen, and I want to end the paper by returning to that. Beckett, as I mentioned, went regularly to the theatre in Dublin as a young man, all this not only extending his already formidable knowledge of a wide range of writers, but also developing his sensitivity to what happens in the gap between page and stage. He saw *A Doll's House* at the Abbey Theatre,¹⁹ where he also went, in November 1932, to see *The Wild Duck*, a play he deeply admired.²⁰ The previous year, he had seen Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* at the Gaiety Theatre (Pilling, p.35). He was later to tell David Gullette that he considered this to be a truly great play. Significantly, he expressed the opinion that, contrary to the opinion of many, Peer Gynt was not Ibsen's masterpiece.

¹⁸ Letter of 22 October 1972.

¹⁹ See John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p.152.

²⁰ See John Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), p.40.

It might at first sight seem surprising that Beckett should prefer *An Enemy of the People* to *Peer Gynt*, especially in the light of the co-resonances I have discussed earlier between Peer Gynt and Beckett's complex explorations of subjectivity. *Peer Gynt* provides not only arresting stage images, but also a nuanced texturing which laces tragic with comic, and which draws

attention to its own provisional fabulation in a manner which would seem complementary with some elements of Beckett's stages. *An Enemy of the People*, on the other hand, deals with a society riddled with consciousness of ownership - ownership of intellectual, financial and cultural capital. Within those competing demands, it demonstrates chillingly the brittleness of reputation, the dictatorship of convention, the temptation of the herd, and the acute dilemmas which preferential knowledge can bring. The context is one which seems far removed from Beckett's landscapes devoid of landmarks, and peopled by individuals whose economic, social and familial backgrounds are largely unknown and unknowable.

Now it could of course be argued that these economic and social tensions are not absent from Beckett's stages, but that they underlie the deep structure of those stage transactions. This kind of argument, seen within new historicist Beckett criticism, especially in Ireland, is a convincing one and one that can be sustained if we wish to posit an experiential recognition on the part of Beckett. But in attempting to account for Beckett's admiration of *An Enemy of the People*, I want also to suggest another, dramaturgical reason for his enthusiasm. It seems to me that Beckett as a young man, reading and attending performances of a wide variety of plays, was already gravitating towards texts and stage images which exhibited a kind of intense brevity or economy rather than ones which were more protracted and labyrinthine. Now we all know – because all of us here are interested in theatre – that an inspired director and committed actors can breathe life into potentially inert plays, and the other way round, that unimaginative direction and half-hearted acting can kill a potentially dynamic play. But, with all these caveats in mind, one notable structural contrast between *Peer Gynt* and *An Enemy of the People* is that *Peer Gynt* is diffuse and circuitous. The stage seems to strain to hold *Peer Gynt* as he traverses successive experiences. Yet, while rich in movement and image, the play is also intensely verbal. This is particularly noticeable at the close of the play, when *Peer* tries to translate his perplexity into a series of rationalisations.

An Enemy of the People, on the other hand, is remarkably fleet and fitful in its transactions. There is rationalisation and explication, but it is all drawn into a kind of vortex of Dostoevskian impulsiveness and concise spontaneity. Beckett at this time, the early 1930s, was deeply interested in Dostoevsky and Gide. And there is, it seems to me, something of the acte gratuit in Dr Stockmann's mercurial and almost inexplicable reversals in attitude and resolution. This is of course a very rapidly drawn contrast, which I haven't time here to expand upon, but I think it may provide a key to Beckett's attraction to the play. We have already discussed Beckett's distaste for being asked to explain or account for his characters and their situations. It is notable that Ibsen is careful as An Enemy of the People draws to a close to resist diagnosing or explaining Stockmann's increasingly rash forfeit of majoritarian advantage.

How, then, does Shaw fit back into the picture? I have tried in the course of this paper to suggest points of both convergence and divergence, engagement as well as disengagement, between Ibsen and Beckett. Shaw's response to Ibsen was much more whole-hearted. Shaw is on the whole much more attentive than either Ibsen or Beckett to word than to image, to collective transactions rather than to individual pilgrimages. As we have seen, he particularly welcomed what he saw as Ibsen's innovative inclusion of discussion. Having welcomed it, he also gave it joyful hospitality within his own plays, so much so that Beckett turned away from the excess. This year, we celebrate Beckett's centenary. At the time of Shaw's centenary, in 1956, a committee of the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin wrote to Beckett, by then living in Paris. They were preparing a commemorative brochure as a tribute to Shaw, and requested a few words from his compatriot Samuel Beckett. His reply was unexpected: 'You ask me for a tribute to GBS, in French, for your souvenir programme. This is too tall an order for me. I wouldn't write in French for King street. I wouldn't suggest that GB is not a great play-wright, whatever that is when it's at home. What I would do is give the whole unupsettable apple-cart for a sup of the Hawk's Well, or the Saints', or a whiff of Juno, to go no further. Sorry.'²¹

²¹ See James Knowlson (ed.), Samuel Beckett: An Exhibition (London: Turret Books, 1971), p.14.

IBSEN TO BECKETT VIA SHAW

The coded reference expressed here for Yeats, Synge, and O'Casey is designed to destabilise the apple-cart (the title of Shaw's late play). Beckett's so-called 'tribute' to Shaw, despite its Shavian ring, brings the apples falling about his fellow countryman's ears. Shaw may have been a pioneering proponent of Ibsen's work, but Beckett could not do the same for Shaw. If Beckett had to choose another dramatist with whom to share a writing table, it would be not with Shaw, but with Ibsen.

