ON AND OFFSTAGE: Spiritual Performatives in Beckett's Drama

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The yearning for the beyond in Beckett's plays is relatively clear. Its nature, nevertheless, is definitely not and not supposed to be. Meaning, like Winnie's song, must come from within. Jean-Michel Rabaté, halfway between textuality and psychoanalysis, mentions "A paradoxical positivity is granted to life *in extremis*, the happiness of living, of seeing and breathing are asserted precisely at the moment of their fading away".[19] If spirituality for Beckett is freedom (not bliss, God forbid!), the likely conclusion is that he can only point out a way there, rather than tell us what it is, and actors and audiences alike must choose whether and how to walk it. I contend that "make sense who may" (*What Where*), the last words in Beckett's last play, is a piece of spiritually responsible and serious advice rather than a tongue-in-cheek evasion. With exquisite spiritual tact, free of any charge or religious blackmail, Beckett offers an alternative spirituality. Keir Elam uses the image of the ferryboat on the Acheron to say that the boat returns him (Beckett) "to the hell of his own making on *this* side of the divide" (in *CCB* 1994, 162). I suggest that Beckett rather subtly points out a tentative approach that may replace the dubious, unreliable, cruel (if existing) divine consciousness with the human one. Lacan explains that ghosts arise from "the gap left by omission of a significant rite".[20] On Beckett's stages and off them, the characters and their ghosts try to make up for this Lacanian omission. In many of his plays, the body is lamed and tortured, the feelings and emotions, familiar as they are, are observed from afar. But the self-conscious thinking process, ghostly on and offstage, is always here and now and individual, and in focus. Perhaps a real spirit, but always offstage, or inside the unseen of the human being.

Notes

1. Mary Bryden, *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God* (London: MacMillan, 1998), 1.

2. Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber 1986). Hereafter *CDW*, followed by page number.

3. Ruby Cohn, "Ghosting Through Beckett", in *SBT/A* 2, "Beckett in the 1990's: Selected Papers from the second International Backett Symposium Held in The Hague, 8-12 April, 1992", ed. by Marius Buning and Lois Oppenheim (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), 1-11.

4. Shimon Levy, *Samuel Beckett's Self-referential Drama* (London: MacMillan 1990), 48-57.

5. Clas Zilliacus, "*Act Without Words I* As Cartoon and Codicil", in *SBT/A* 2, op. cit., 298.

6. Herta Schmid, *Strukturalistische Dramentheorie* (Kronberg TS: Scripter 1973), 81.

7. I dealt with the spirituality of Beckett's TV and films in "Spirit Made Light", in *SBT/A* 4, "The Savage Eye/L'Œil Fauve: A Collection of Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett's Film and Television plays", ed. by Cathatrina Wulf (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995), 65-82.

8. Anna McMullen, *Theatre On Trial: Samuel Beckett's Later Drama* (London: Routledge, 1993), 113.

9. See Rubin Rabinowitz, "Repetition and Underlying Meaning in Samuel Beckett's Trilogy", in Lance St John Butler and Robin J. Davis (eds), *Rethinking Beckett* (London: MacMillan, 1990), 31-67, and Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett, Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 115-69.

10. Shimon Levy, "Does Beckett Admit the Chaos?", in *Journal of Beckett Studies* no. 6 (1997), 81-95.

11. Louis Overbeck's interview with Brenda Bynum, in Linda Ben Zvi (ed.), *Women in Beckett* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990), 53, and Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge UP), 238.

12. Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage 1996), 28-38.

13. James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 680.

14. Beckett to Lawrence Harvey; in Levy, 1997, 76.

15. Gottfried Büttner, *Samuel Beckett's Novel* Watt (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1984), 153.

16. Michael Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead* (New York: Grove P, 1969), 69-70.

17. H. Porter Abbott, *Beckett Writing Beckett* (Ithaca: Cornell UP), 158.

18. Katharine Worth, "Beckett's Ghosts", in S.E. Wilmer (ed.), *Beckett in Dublin* (Dublin: The Lilliput P, 1992), 72.

19. Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Beckett's Ghosts and Fluxions", in *SBT/A* 5, "Beckett & la Psychanalyse & Psychoanalysis", ed. by Sjef Houppermans (Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), 37.

20. Phil Baker, "Ghost Stories: Beckett and the Literature of Introjection", in *Journal of Beckett Studies* no. 5 (1996), 59.

pause.]" Another 'hand-oriented' ending is *Act Without Words I*: "He looks at his hands." *Act Without Words II* ends with A's prayer. Krapp's last tape keeps turning on in silence. In *Theatre I* wrenches the pole from B's grasp. In *Theatre II* A raises his handkerchief timidly towards C's face, whose back is to the audience. A Freeze? The end of *Play* suggests that W1, W2 and M will continue forever. Any actual theatrical show of their lighted relationships is but a fraction of their eternal dramatic situation. *Come and Go* ends with silence. *Breath* ends like it started, with a *vagitus,* indicating a birth into another realm. In some of the later plays the freezes become a dwindling into offstage. Mouth in *Not I* is sucked into offstage, but goes on talking, beyond the fade-out of the light. In *That Time,* the head keeps a toothless smile for five seconds, fade out. The entire act IV of *Footfalls* presents an empty stage from which M was sucked out. Fade out. In *A Piece of Monologue*: "Thirty seconds before end of speech lamplight begins to fail. Lamp out. Silence. SPEAKER, globe, foot of pallet, barely visible in diffuse light. Ten seconds. Curtain." In *Rockaby* the woman dies on stage – "(Together: echo of 'rock her off', coming to rest of rock, slow fade out)". A rare event, since even Nag and Nell die out of sight in *Happy Days* and the other characters' deaths are 'only' suggested. *Ohio Impromptu* ends with a textually 'explained' freeze: Listener and Reader have turned to stone. Fade out. Catastrophe ends with a long fade-out. Finally, in *What Where*: "I switch off. [*Light off* P. *Pause. Light off* V.]". Many of these liminal endings are highly suggestive of another "realm" offstage, on the verge of which they happen.

The 'Unsaid'

Many of Beckett's plays contain a secret. I do not refer here to the often strange onstage position of the characters, but a to a secret regarding something apparently quite essential, yet conspicuously left unsaid. Hamm and Clov have an intensive repartee concerning "what's happened" out there, and why all is dead. (*CDW*, 128-29) The recorded storm-scene in *Krapp's Last Tape* is cut off by Krapp just before reaching its explicit peak: "Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night in March […] never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision at last […] This I fancy is what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that… (hesitates)… for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely – (Krapp switches off impatiently…)." A little later yet another 'essential' is hidden,

skipped over: "[…] the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most" – and again Krapp switches off, cursing (*CDW*, 220). Krapp does not want to confront what he once thought to be "his most" – I assume – meaningful moment, and so the audience too is denied it. In *Come and Go* the three women tell about each other secrets that the audience, again, is not allowed to hear. They elicit three "oh's", which are "Three very different sounds" (*CDW*, 357), unlike most of this short text which is supposed to be spoken as "low" and "colourless".

Theatre II seems to offer an entire play dedicated to evading the essentials, which I understand as the implied author's ironical, indirect and self-critical confession. A and B encounter the phrase "morbidly sensitive to the opinions of others" – repeated nine times in the play, thus drawing a great deal of attention. This hilarious repetition explains why A and B cannot "make out" C, and the phrase serves as an intra-textual reason why Beckett evades the 'essential'. In a much more sombre 'inquiry' play, *What Where*, the characters are given "the works" until they confess. But the audience never learns what the 'what' or the 'where' is and where it all happens.

'Beyond' and the (stage) instructions on how to get there

"Repetitive formulas and ritual acts, disembodied voices and sounds, ghostly visitations, prayers, strange rites carried on in the dark of night", pervade Beckett's later drama.[17] *Footfalls*, I believe, is one of the most explicit dramatic attempts Beckett had made in indicating the threshold between the stage and a theatrical 'beyond', primarily through the stage instructions. M paces along a nine-step long lit path, precisely limited by darkness. Whenever reaching the border, she either turns back or stops. In the end she stops again, and does not re-appear in the final 10 seconds long 'act IV'. Katharine Worth notes that the theatre in *Footfalls* "became a kind of a church" and finally May's restless soul departed.[18] Semiotically, however, May touches upon the *limes* of (this particular) theatre. Moreover, one may ask whether M is a visual projection of V; or is V a vocal projection of M, as a voice inside or outside of her? Rather than V appearing onstage, M joins (?) V offstage. Like Mouth in *Not I*, and P in *Catastrophe*, she is gradually sucked into the offstage beyond. In fact, it is "offstage" the active absence, that finally dominates a disappearing stage. The complete dialogue and the stage directions text of *Footfalls* suggest a sceptical brinkmanship between 'secular' text and 'holy' stage directions. From and towards 'A Divine'?

obvious 'image' of both the narrator and the author. "At me too someone is looking…", we are reminded.

Offstage messengers: bodies, characters, sights and voices

Dramatic manifestations of spirits, ghosts, inner voices and such-like "Schwankende Gestalten" (Goethe, *Faust*), can relatively easily be treated as theatrical images in other playwrights' works. Their accumulation in Beckett's works adds up to a quality beyond quantity and creates a coherent pantheon of liminal vice-existers, as well as a 'spiritual' kind of dramatic syntax.

Godot 'himself' can conveniently be called the Father of modern offstage characters. "The [boy] is after all a messenger, coming from a totally different sphere", and he repeated, "from a totally different dimension", as Beckett told the Büttners.[15] Whether coming from angelic spheres or from some mytho-poetic other realm, in theatrical terms at least the boy certainly comes from offstage. The flies in *Act Without Words I* are inhabited by a good God or another evil power, perhaps one of Godot's cousins. Whereas Godot is almost passive in the play, in *Act Without Words I* the offstage power is not just active, but the sole motivating element. In *Endgame*, a boy is conspicuously denied an entrance. There is ample evidence for the existence of a whole class of Beckett children who dwell offstage, although it is not always clear if they are remembered as independently 'real', or as the characters' younger selves. Nevertheless they are vigorously exorcised and after *Waiting for Godot*, they do not set foot onstage, except, perhaps, for the reader in *Ohio Impromptu*.

An astounding number of Beckett characters are located on the verge of offstage, gradually dwindling into the 'not-here' black area out there. Nag and Nell live in dustbins and die there, out of sight, in an onstage 'offstage'. Winnie, likewise, sinks vertically into her mound. Mouth in *Not I* is virtually sucked into blackness with a long fade-out. Krapp's recorded voice is private vocal exorcising ritual of an old (younger) self from the past, presented as an evening in the future, and dragged into the necessarily eternal present of any theatre show. C in *Theatre II* stands back to the audience, about to jump from a sixth floor, upstage. The figures in *Play*, up to their necks in urns, are located in a limbo-like dramatic space, indeed a purgatory[16] and most of their bodies are offstage. The exits of Vi, Flo and Ru create a fascinating pattern of disappearing acts. Similar to *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Waiting for Godot*, short exists and entrances emphasise the borderlines between stage and offstage. Moreover, offstage in *Waiting for Godot* functions as an identity eraser, and when Didi and Gogo return

onstage they must relocate themselves, space and time-wise. The baby in *Breath* is vocally born onto the stage, and re-born into offstage at the end of its 35 second long life. *A Piece of Monologue* is replete with ghosts. In a homeopathic way, the ghosts mentioned in the text play an ontological game with the ghost-like figure who speaks about them: authorial (stage-instruction text) and dialogical text ghost one another. V, "in the shape of a small megaphone at head level" (*CDW*, 469) in *What Where* is a voice, never seen.

Are these vocal and visual apparitions only psychological projections? Offstage, as the only clearly close yet 'not-here' theatrical space, a constantly present non-being that surrounds each and every stage, often sends various specific vocal and visual messengers to Beckett's on-stage characters.

An "I" is always present in the plays; a "Thou" is always a necessary witness, even if the "I" is alone on stage. Since in theatre one cannot really be alone, the Beckettian "I" splits into two or more selves. A strange attractor, to quote Lorenz, an evasive Him is also constantly there on stage. The "Him" may be interpreted in different ways. It could be God ("*Esse est Percipi*"), without whose providence the world will not exist. It might be Beckett himself, the implied author, as an obvious option. It can also be another 'witnessing' character on stage (according to a medium-oriented approach). Finally, the "Him" may indicate the actual audience, to whose "I" the text appeals, in a need to replace the fictive selves of the characters with the real ones of living people who share the same space for as long as the performance lasts.

Dramatic odds and structures, theatrical endings

Beckett's theatrical endings can be divided into 'never-ending ends', 'freezing ends' and 'fading ends'. The theatrical endings are well supported dramatically, from a structural perspective. Some of the plays are peculiarly open-ended, or designed as an extraordinary freeze, a dramatic *aporia*, or else as a 'dissolve' of the characters stuck halfway between on- and offstage. Open-ended final-beats are an implicit demand for an existential choice regarding 'The Holy'.

Estragon and Vladimir "do not move" at the end of the play, and are likely to continue not moving in the next act, following the second, which should, in fact be played one evening following the first act. Hamm re-shrouds himself while Clov freezes on the threshold of offstage, at the end of Endgame. In *Happy Days* Willie's hand reaches toward Winnie and freezes before the light goes down. "[They look at each other. Long

their own meaning to it, spiritual or any other. Finally, rituals are commensurate with Beckett's substituting a rejected theocentric providence with an anthropocentric, fully endorsed human spirituality. Devoid of an external initiatory significance, Beckett's rituals can be seen as an auxiliary and tentative initiation of the self by her- or himself.

Creators

Regarded from a theatrical perspective, God is a director who creates images and characters ('Personae'), who are supposed to be and act in the newly created world. Nevertheless, the new human creatures have not yet been given any precise stage instructions, except that they should "be fruitful and multiply; and must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil [...] for in the day that you eat of it you shall die". The biblical narrator presents God as a frustrated director, dissatisfied with his actors who do not properly perform their roles, yet not seeming to know in advance how the play should finally shape. The right play in the Bible is not only that human kind should keep God's rules – but also that human kind must become God's image.[12]

In many of his works, Beckett follows one of the most fundamental creation stories in Western culture, and like Adam, who follows God, he begets characters who create other creating characters "in his own likeness, after his own image" (Genesis 5:3). As often physically passive and crippled, but mentally conscious and self-referential, many Beckett characters revolve versions of creation stories in their minds, inventing characters and selves for themselves in a godlike manner. Malone creates Macmann; the Unnamable creates Mahood, to mention but two of Beckett's prose works. Godot could be an invented creation by and common to his two waiters. Clov sees, or does he invent, a boy who, unlike the boy in *Waiting for Godot*, is not allowed to enter and is left offstage in his already dubious onto-theatrical situation. Winnie tells her Mildred story – it could be her own childhood memory. Maddie Rooney in *All That Fall* creates a daughter (or exorcises a younger self) in a similar vein. *Waiting for Godot* features a live child, angelic as he may be. Jerry and the Lynch twins appear as live children in *All That Fall*, but Addie in *Embers* is even more of a vocal phantom than her phantom-like mother Ada. The only live child in Beckett's film and TV scripts is the boy in *Ghost Trio*, perhaps another younger self of the man in the grey room. In his later dramatic works Beckett seems to shift from procreation to mental creation, of children, at least. In his plays procreation shifts gradually into fictional creation, but the 'progeny' are almost always creative creatures.

"The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark" (*Company*, 1996, 46) is a good example. Different from their appearance in prose, an onstage character is truly a Golem, in whose creation the actors too take part, as theatrically self-referential creation fables. Even the Old Testament God needed company and therefore talks (to himself or to the angels?) in the plural: "Let *us* make man [...]" (Genesis 1:26, my italics). In theatre, the audience is a *sine qua non*.

Beckett's stage characters are sometimes forced creators. The woman in *Rockaby*, "all eyes," is looking "for another, another living soul" and finding none, she creates, or realises that she "was her own other/own other living soul." (*CDW*, 441). The relationships between the (still) living, looking, listening and rocking woman and her recorded voice are reminiscent of Krapp and his exorcised voice, his old self. The woman's mouth in *Not I* gives birth to herself with the word "out" – a word of birth, also the birth of the first clearly audible word in the play. Similarly, the man in *A Piece of Monologue* opens with "Birth was the death of him". In *Ohio Impromptu* the reader can be interpreted as the younger self of the listener. Despite rigorous attempt to present P as subdued, the true (?) self of P is made quite obvious at the end of *Catastrophe*.[13]

In art, and especially in modern art, Man creates (by) him/her-self. Observed from the performative as well as performance oriented perspective, there is a direct link between the divine 'image', and that with which humans wish to create, as a continuation of, or a rebellion against a divine creator. From a theocentric point of view, the biblical God created Man in His own image. It can also be argued that it has always been Man who created his god(s) in his own image, much as Xenophanes maintained in the 6th century BC that horses would create their gods in equestrian shape. In Beckett's theatre, we are invited to unwillingly suspend our belief in the created personae.

Beckett characters represent an ancient (artistic) desire to continue the human 'self', and expand it and the creator's self with a creature as much alike the creator as possible. Of special interest is the moment when a Beckett creature says (or deliberately does not say) "I" to itself, and traces the (fictitious?) humanity involved in saying "I". According to numerous religious traditions, the "I" is nothing short of the divine element in Man. The vast gap between himself and the divine creator ("All my life I've compared myself to him"). The self, according to Beckett, exists by proxy and is always an *être manqué*.[14] In counter-distinction to the *Genesis* myth, a self creates another self, for company, perhaps like God, yet in the

a value-system, ritualistic theatrical patterns too are more likely to accommodate the message, rebellious as they may be. The Greek gods, for instance, may have been presented as cruel, lascivious or downright unjust in Classical drama, but they were nevertheless believed by their spectators to exist.

Characters in Beckett's intensively liminal and ritualistic plays certainly do not take the existence of a God for granted. They do, however, perform personal rituals, individualised derivations of *rites de passage,* of birth and death primarily, and the various modes along which the characters spend their time in between the two.[8] These modes are created verbally as well as designed through costumes, movement, lighting and props, in a manner both formal and free. Beckett imposes ritualised behavioural patterns upon his characters, while denying them the relative comfort of believing in the objective, absolute and obligating value-system on which those very same ritual systems rely. The intensive ritualisation, expressed by repetitive words and actions,[9] can be experienced as a conscious, ironically pathetic attempt to impose meaning upon desolate spaces and human situations where perhaps there isn't any. Moreover, rituals can be characterised as deliberate quantifiers of qualitative elements, translating the 'unspeakable' into a 'liveable', at least 'bearable' situation.

Beckett's stage-designs, suggestive, metaphoric or symbolic as they are often interpreted, do not volunteer significance all by themselves. Many Beckett characters are avid ritualisers. Realising their locations and situations and reacting to them, they must consequently guess, allude to, find or create some sense for the spaces and situations in which they are stuck. As in the core of many religious rituals they do so performatively, in doing rather than describing things. But in the absence of an accepted value-system, even the mini-rituals in the early plays constantly collapse, and are exposed by their performers as merely a crutch: "We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?" (*CDW*, 63).

In the later plays, the very performance of the rituals replaces the externally given meaning-and-order. This does not mean that the rituals are rendered completely empty. In their explicit theatrical and often meta-theatrical framework, they become self-supportive and self-referential. Not only "song must come from the heart" but rituals too give us the impression that they "pour out from the inmost, like a thrush" (*CDW*, 155). They are functional in combining 'meaningful' cyclical time with 'meaningless' linear time, and they are a consciously tentative attempt to endow space too with some sense. Beckett's theatrical rituals constitute an independent, indigenous 'meaning', valid for as long as the character

ascribes the ritual with some personal meaning, minimal as it is. Attempting to endow sheer time and space with an imposed quasi-meaningful plot, some Beckettian rituals are designed, predominantly, to subvert the passage of time, as in *Waiting for Godot,* and to encapsulate linear time with cyclical patterns. They may also be more space-oriented and fight or fill-in the claustrophobic space, as in *Endgame*, *Act Without Words I* and *II* represent time in spatial terms through movement that connects the two. In *Act Without Words I* the character is an obsessively orderly man, who returns the cubes to the place from which they had descended, as though acknowledging the higher order that placed them there to begin with. The effect, I believe, is caustically humorous. In *Act Without Words II* the players are either slow, awkward and absent, or brisk, rapid and precise. Both live their lives as an imposed ritual, performing similar series of actions. In *Happy Days* Winnie's ritualised activity is counter-balanced with the vertical axis, as an answer to the scorching 'holy' light. Through her fiddling with her bag, her comb and toothbrush etc., she feels "sucked up" when, in fact, she is being sucked down. Rituals may indeed have an uplifting effect.

Some rituals help Beckett's characters cope with their crippled bodies, and their emotional and mental difficulties, thus serving as a painful corset, a frame to sustain a soul torn with grief and loneliness. The orderly (by definition) rituals complement the disorderly flux of emotions and create a delicately chaotic pattern of a higher level.[10] The more obsessive they are, the more they tend to underline the vacuity of offstage. A good example for this is the speech pattern of Mouth in *Not I*. Bereft of any stage properties, and sunk yet another step into offstage, her whole being indeed is "hanging on its words" alone. (*CDW*, 379) The performance of on-stage rituals, moreover, may have a liberating effect on the actors, not only on the characters. In meticulously following Beckett's precise and 'ritual' stage instructions, the actors are nevertheless invited to enlist their creative freedom from within.[11] Unlike traditional religious and theatrical rituals, usually beastly respectful, some of Beckett's are at least humorous, if not downright funny. It helps pass the time. Hamm, for one, often tends to flaunt his own ritualistic (story-telling, play-within-a-play) artifice: "I'll soon have finished with this story. [Pause.] Unless I bring in other characters" (*CDW*, 118).

Rituals are intended to give us the impression that we exist, as in *Waiting for Godot*, and some of them must be filled-in by the audience. Having experienced compulsive unchanging movement patterns in *What Where* or in *Quad*, for example, the audience is practically forced to supply

have driven me to explore the possible existence of a spiritual perception in Beckett's plays from a predominantly theatrical perspective, rather than a religious or psychoanalytical one. Most of Beckett's dramatic works manifest a quest for an unattainable 'beyond' that may indeed be 'out there', or, and equally unattainable, 'inside' the dramatic personae. (Doubting, it may be added, keeps spirituality alive, and Beckett seems to manifest an asymptotic tendency towards the divine.) In their often-heightened reflexivity, Beckett's characters try to reach an indefinable but intensely looked-for 'other' state of consciousness or reality, in realising the situation: "All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery. (*Looking wildly about him.*) Look at this muckheap! I've never stirred from it!" (*CDW*, 56).

This clearly manifested quest for a 'beyond' is expressed, primarily, in this playwright's revolutionary usage of **offstage**. Offstage is not only the "relevant to the stage" unseen space. It has developed to be a theatrical "entity", always "there" as a present, exclusively theatrical void, a black halo, over (and sometimes on) each and every stage.[4]

Allusions to some higher forces are constantly employed, both playfully and seriously, in *Waiting for Godot*: "We're not tied?" (*CDW*, 19). In *Happy Days* Winnie, perhaps naively, opens her day with "Hail Holy Light". In *Endgame*, on the other hand, God is bitterly discarded as "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" The response, however ironic, is "Not yet". In the later dramatic works the perception of issues 'not from here and now', is more refined. An ominous being roams in the offstage flies of *Act Without Words I*. In *Cascando,* significantly, the light, unseen by radio listeners, is spoken about in a serious tone: "He need only… turn over… he'd see them… shine on him…" (*CDW*, 303), suggesting that the character shuns the light. W1, M and W2 in *Play* are forced to respond to an inquisitive light, the nature of which is left for them and for the audience to reflect. Is it 'mere eye' or 'another' consciousness? The female voice in *Eh Joe,* inside Joe's head or really there ("He really hears her", Beckett said), alludes to known prayers, and asks "How's your Lord these days?", and quotes the threatening line "Thou fool thy soul", as an anticipation realised at the very moment of utterance. Mouth in *Not I* laughs wildly on mentioning "a merciful […] God" (*CDW*, 377), nevertheless she also says, "God is love".

The 'beyond', explicitly demonstrated in Beckett's drama, is expressed by specific medium-accommodating means. It is naturally always hidden, on or offstage, while the characters try theatrically (or cinematographically or radiophonically), to reach it. Moreover, what the medium used, it tries to break its own expressive as well as technical limitations, and reach beyond itself. Though not rigid, Beckett was, mediumally speaking, a purist.[5] At the same time, since, unlike MacLuhan, Beckett's medium is not only the message, his various expressive means can be regarded as a component of the message and a metaphor of the characters' conditions. Characters like Didi and Gogo, Hamm and Winnie, the man in *Act Without Words I* or M in *Footfalls* constantly attempt to reach 'beyond'. Being 'here' onstage rather than 'there' and off it, they do not and cannot know what is 'there'. Logically, they are not entitled to call it 'spiritual' either. But their author may (and does) create a series of discrepancies between the dialogical text of what they say, and the authorial text (alias 'stage instructions') of what they must do.[6] Whereas the characters' texts tend more often than not to the sceptic or 'secular' trend, their stage instructions are (equally often) 'holy'.

If 'Holy' means a numinous attitude towards divine beings in specially consecrated times, spaces and plots (or events), Beckett's drama is not holy. If, however, the notion of 'Holy' is allowed to mean an (artistic) attempt to reach essences that are neither only physical nor even mental, then Beckett's plays come as close as possible to it. In some religious beliefs, the yearning for the divine is perfectly 'kosher', and some theologies are willing to accept "The Road" (e.g. the Jesuit 'El Camino') without conditioning Paradise on reaching the target-line. 'Holiness', like 'spirituality', has become a cliché, and is often treated accordingly by Beckett. Notwithstanding, the plays still reveal an astounding degree of reverence towards an inexplicable 'out there', beyond the stage, off the screen, in the silences of radio-plays. As a rational sceptic, Beckett is as explicit as the intellect can account for. As an artist not always committed to discursive thinking, he nevertheless points out a direction towards other-than-physical and mental possibilities. Under the notion of the present *in absentia* 'being' of offstage, I hence discuss ritual elements, creation motifs, and the 'unsaid' as three active manifestations of offstage.[7]

Secular rituals as surrogate religiosity

Beckett's dramatic works reveal an intensive use of rituals. In this exploration of spiritual tendencies in his drama, it does not suffice to maintain that theatre, as a whole, is a kind of ritual in any case (following the historical or anthropological methodologies of Huizinga, Van Gennep, Goffman, Berne, or the theatre-oriented ones of Turner, Schechner, Carlson and others). As long as theatre reflects social orders and systems of faith where the Divine is tolerated, if not taken for granted, as constituting

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Shimon Levy

This article draws a distinction between the religious scepticism which is a recurrent feature of Beckett's work, and the "spiritual" characters and situations which inhabit it. Within a predominantly theatrical and performative perspective, rather than a religious or psychoanalytical one, the notion of a "beyond" is traced, with particular reference to offstage space. Three active manifestations of such offstage "being" are discussed: ritual elements, creation motifs and the "unsaid".

"(No) danger of the spiritual thing."
(*Play*)

Beckett's works reveal a unique brinkmanship between accepting and rejecting religion, the Divine, or even a more general spiritual perspective. The following observations do not focus on 'religious notions' in Beckett's works, or on his admittedly problematic attitude to God.[1] I argue, however, that Beckett's lucidly intellectual approach, his merciless scepticism, and his frequently ridiculing attitude towards sentimental and simplistic notions of "the spiritual thing" (*Eh Joe*, in *CDW*, 365)[2] must be juxtaposed with his intensive quest for a "beyond". Institutionalised religions and innumerable sects alike, and harnessed to endless political, financial and psychological utterly non-spiritual purposes have often manipulated "the spiritual thing". Consequently, I treat a wider aspect in Beckett's 'sceptic spirituality' and refer to 'spiritual' characters and situations, albeit within the framework of dramatic analysis and performance theory. Beckett uses the term 'spiritual' in various ways, deriding and longing on different occasions, perhaps because he too realised that the term itself as well as many of its implications and associations has undergone severe degradation by excessive use, misuse and abuse.

Notions of a 'beyond' hover in and above Beckett's drama like a restlessly re-appearing deconstructed Godot. Though the word 'ghost' is sparingly used in his drama, the plays are replete with ghost lights, ghostly characters and ghost-like situations.[3] The frequent appearances of these literal and metaphorical threshold phenomena, no less than their quality,