

**“The Death of a Dynasty”
Presence in Drama and Theory:
Samuel Beckett and Jacques Derrida**

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**I. “Je ne peux pas continuer, je vais continuer”: Beckett After
*The Unnamable***

“Le grand remède aux misères de ce monde, c’est l’absorption dans l’instant présent.” —Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Beckett published *L’Innommable* in 1953. This last book of the trilogy was also Beckett’s last so-called “novel.” Three years later, in an interview with Israel Schenker, Beckett explained the move away from novel writing as inevitable after the trilogy. After writing texts in which there was “no ‘I,’ no ‘have,’ no ‘being,’” there was, as Beckett said, truly “no way to go on.”¹ Despite this claim, Beckett, like the ever-running discourse of *The Unnamable*, did indeed “go on.” During the same period in which Beckett stopped writing novels, he began writing extensively for the theatre. Since then, many critics—among them William Worthen, Sidney Homan, and Michael Robinson—² have come to believe that the “coincidence” of Beckett’s last novel with his increased interest in the theatre was no coincidence at all; that Beckett’s turn to the stage represented a “natural” progression in his career, “the only direction in which a development was possible.”³ Having just completed several novels increasingly dominated by a sense of absence—the absence of “I,” of “have” and so on—Beckett, it is often suggested, turned to the stage in search of what had become increasingly elusive in his novels: “presence.”

There is some evidence to support the claim that Beckett himself viewed his work after *L’Innommable* as indicative of a general turn from the inherent “lack” of the novel towards the “presence” of the theatre. Apart from *En Attendant Godot*, which was published in French in 1952, the majority of Beckett’s dramatic texts were indeed composed only after the trilogy had been completed. Perhaps more

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striking, as Steven Connor notes,⁴ the suggestion that Beckett turned to the theatre in search of a “presence” not found in the novel was actually made first by Beckett himself. In Michael Haerdter’s *Materialen zu Becketts Endspiel*, Beckett states: “Theater is für mich zunächst eine Erholung von der Arbeit am Roman”⁵ (“Theatre is for me a relief/rest from the work of the novel.”). Beckett goes on to explain that this is not because he thought it easier to write theatrical texts than novels, but rather because the theatrical performance fulfills a need that novel writing does not: “Man hat es mit einem bestimmten Raum zu tun und mit Menschen in diesem Raum” (“[All] human beings have a need for space, but also to share that space with other human beings.”).⁶ Although it might seem as if Beckett is articulating a philosophical declaration about the nature of presence and being in that his statement is clearly a generalization (“All humans . . .”), there is little in the interview to justify such a reading. Instead, it appears that Beckett is expressing a desire for a rather commonplace theorization of the theatre as the privileged space of moving, possibly speaking, bodies on stage—as the space of group presence. In other words, a wish to participate in a rather commonplace identification of the theatre as the privileged space of group presence. After immersing himself in the extreme isolation and claustrophobia associated with the prose of the trilogy,⁷ Beckett—it seems from his statement—simply found relief in the physical presence of bodies on stage.

II. “Being There:” Presence and the Body

The designation of the theatre as the space in which “metaphysical plenitude”⁸ reigns is a common identification in Western thought. The assumption is that the theatre permits—and in the case of traditional theatre, even demands—the presence of actual moving, speaking bodies on stage. That the theater is also simultaneously a space of non-presence in that the people on stage are acting and the events portrayed are not “real” goes without saying. However, the actors are nonetheless still physically present on stage and actions are performed on that stage and in the present time of the production. Thus, regardless of the fact that what is being presented is simply “pretend,” the audience experiences the production in a way that is more immediately assessable to the senses than its more cerebral prose counterpart. The determination of the theatre as the privileged space of presence for such reasons, of course, amounts to the simple—even simplistic—equating of “presence” with “being.” This is the ostensible reason underlying the primacy of performance that was even more in vogue in experimental theatre of the late 1960s and 70s: performance is privileged because what takes place in the staging of a text appears to be nothing less than a miracle. To stage a theatrical text, to put it physically before an audience, is to seemingly *embody* it or resurrect it before that

audience. In this not-so-distant relative of Berkeley's "Esse est percipi," acting out a written text on stage is to bestow upon it flesh and, therefore, life.

In "Notes from the Underground: *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*," Herbert Blau suggests an unspoken dialogue between Beckett and Antoine Artaud, perhaps the most well known French playwright to have attempted both to access and exploit a supposed natural presence of the theatre. In fact, Blau describes Beckett's *Endgame* as more than simply *evocative of* Artaud's theater, but rather *as* Artaud's theater. Here, he claims, "We are in Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, at the dark root of the scream, the unbearably humane."⁹ Before examining the extent to which this statement about the correspondence between the work of these two playwrights is legitimate, it is necessary to first recall the theoretical basis of Artaud's concept of the theater. In "Production and Metaphysics," Artaud characterizes his conceptualization of a "fully present theatre" as a "theatre of cruelty." By naming it thus, Artaud was not advocating subjecting the audience to depictions of sadistic or "cruel" actions on stage—not necessarily, in any case. Artaud was more concerned with the relationship between the spectators and the production. Dramatic works should permeate the audience like a "full," "physical" "shock" to the senses, so that the spectators would be permitted to experience the "presence" of the theatre in an extremely intimate, visceral way. Artaud argues that if one allows the stage to "speak its own concrete language," the audience will be able to experience even the language of the production in a "completely tangible manner." Yet, the stage can "speak its own . . . language" and thus can achieve the fullness of presence only if it is independent of the "tyranny of the text"¹⁰ and thus free from representation. Reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idealized, non-representational theatre, Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, Derrida insists, is not a representation at all, which is in part what makes it impossible to achieve: "It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable."¹¹

Probably the most prominent critic to have ever suggested that Beckett's theatre also aims to underscore a sheer, physical "presence"—albeit in a less extreme fashion than in Artaud's theorizations—is writer Alain Robbe-Grillet. Robbe-Grillet claims that by highlighting physical presence, Beckett's plays stage the very essence of the theatre. In his article, "Samuel Beckett, ou la présence sur la scène," Robbe-Grillet suggests that by stressing the essence of the theatre, Beckett is also (re)presenting the "essence" of the human condition. As his primary example, Robbe-Grillet focuses on Beckett's *En Attendant Godot* which he views as representative of the Heideggerean conceptualization of the human condition as "Dasein," or "being-there." With almost no personal background and with seemingly nothing to do but wait, *Godot's* Vladimir and Estragon appear to be simply and "irremediably present." Though they may have little in common with anyone we might know in "real" life, they do seem to share at least one thing with the human condition; the "primary quality" of *being there*.¹²

Four years after the publication of Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman*, Jacques Derrida also examines the association of being and presence in philosophy, but with decidedly more suspicion than Robbe-Grillet. For Derrida, the association of being with presence carries with it greater consequences than that of simply establishing a link between so-called pure presence and the human body—which is, for Derrida, what makes this association particularly dangerous. Once established, this determination allows for the possibility of inaugurating a set of subdeterminations. Among them, Derrida lists “*présence de la chose au regard comme eidos, présence comme substance/essence/existence (ousia), présence temporelle comme pointe (stigmè) du maintenant ou de l’instant (nun), présence à soi du cogito, conscience, subjectivité, co-présence de l’autre et de soi, intersubjectivité comme phénomène intentionnel de l’ego, etc*” (“presence of the thing to the sight as *eidos*, presence as substance/essence/existence [*ousia*], temporal presence as point [*stigmè*] of the now or of the moment [*nun*], the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth”).¹³ Simply put, once presence is linked to Being, a surplus of general principles of metaphysics can henceforth be posited, and all notions that complicate these principles can be disregarded. The moment presence is determined as “being,” we become anesthetized to anything that disrupts the metaphysical assumptions that are born of this association. For Derrida, the coupling of being and presence is nothing less than “*l’ether de la métaphysique*.”¹⁴

III. “Being? Where?” The Absence of Presence in Beckett’s Theatre

The question remains as to whether Beckett’s theatre intends to exploit a “pure presence” or whether it instead means to expose it as an illusion. In order to answer this question, several points must be taken into consideration. First, no play that derives from a text can logically be considered to represent “pure presence,” since it relies on something prior to itself for its existence. In order for presence to be “pure”—by definition—it cannot be tainted by anything that is not itself—in other words, it must be its own origin and end. It goes without saying that Beckett’s staged plays are all the product of a text. Secondly, much of what appears to be indicative of pure presence in his work is the result of detailed stage directions in the script. For example, if the director remains true to the text, as directors such as Roger Blin and Alan Schneider often did,¹⁵ every pause a character makes on stage can be found already recorded in the script. In some plays, such as *Happy Days*, there are hundreds of pauses; all of which are scripted:

... I have the whole—(Pause. *Puzzled.*) Them? (Pause) Or it? (Pause.) Brush and comb it? (Pause.) Sounds improper somehow.

(Pause . . .) What would you say, Willie? (Pause . . .) What would you say, Willie, speaking of your hair, them or it? (Pause.) The hair on your head, I mean. (Pause . . .) The hair on your head, Willie, what would you say speaking of the hair on your head, them or it? (Long pause).¹⁶

In the case of *Footfalls*, even the steps taken are accounted for in the stage directions:

Pacing: starting with right foot (r), from right (r) to left (L), with left foot (l) from L to R. Turn: righthabout at L, lefthabout at R.
Steps: clearly audible rhythmic tread.

Here, the stage directions are later brought to the spectator's attention, for the steps are then measured and voiced by the characters themselves:

One two three four five six seven eight nine wheel one two three
four five six seven eight nine wheel.¹⁷

Even where the pure presence seems to be, if not to be *presented*, at least *re-presented* in Beckett's theatre, it is never truly "pure." "Presence" is exposed in his work to be contaminated by, even produced by, repetition. Vivian Mercier has called *En Attendant Godot* a "theoretical impossibility," for it is a play in which not only "nothing happens,"¹⁸—which would highlight the "presence" and "present" of the moment—but rather in which nothing happens "twice."¹⁹ Clearly, Mercier does not mean to say that literally *nothing at all* happens in the play. That actions are performed, speech is articulated, is indisputable. Vladimir and Estragon wait on a road by one leafless tree for the coming of Godot. They talk to pass the time, meet Pozzo and Lucky, watch the former coerce the latter into performing a variety of commands, and meet a little boy who informs them that Godot is busy and will instead come tomorrow. But as Ruby Cohn notes and the title of the play suggests, the reason that some readers and critics have labeled *Godot* as a play "about nothing," is because the most evident "action" of this play is not an action per se but rather a state—that of waiting: ". . . they keep their appointment and they wait. Night after night, they keep their appointment, and they wait." Echoing Robbe-Grillet, Cohn adds that *Godot's* "thereness unrolls before our perceptions." Cohn maintains that there is in fact actually as much "doing" as being in *Godot*, but the doing and being are "constantly threatened by Nothing."²⁰ Both Cohn and Martin Esslin insist that the apparent stasis in a play like *Godot* might even be better described as less a study on Nothingness than an amplification of the dramatic form, of a "maximal intensification of the tensions that make conventional plays dramatic."²¹

Whatever the particular interpretation of the “events” of *Godot*, the virtual lack of so-called meaningful action that is described by Cohn as frequently having an “improvisational quality,”²² accompanied by a focus on the dramatic form, seems an attempt on the part of the playwright to render the notion of presence—presence of being and present in time—immediately perceptible to the audience. Even Cohn has referred at one time to *Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp’s Last Tape*, as plays that offer not only “endless continua” but also “different images of an unending present.”²³ However, there is an equal emphasis on repetition in Beckett’s plays that complicates such a notion. Besides the innumerable words and phrases that are repeated verbatim in *Godot*, Act Two is so strikingly similar to Act One that it reads as a virtual duplication of all that preceded it. Admittedly, the tree now has leaves on it, signaling the passage of time from the first to the second act, and Pozzo and Lucky’s relationship takes on a decidedly less vaudevillesque and more sadistic tone. Yet the symmetry between the two acts remains startling: Vladimir and Estragon find themselves again on the road, by a tree, in the company of Pozzo and Lucky, later of the little boy who informs them again about Godot’s plans, and all the while they wait. Cohn extends the list of repetitive gestures: “In both acts they comment on their reunion, they complain of their misery, they seek escape into games, they are frightened by offstage menace, they try to remember a past, they stammer a hope for a future, they utter doubts about time, place, and language, they wait for Godot.”²⁴ Or as Mercier writes, nothing happens twice.

Far from affirming a sense of a pure presence, the reprisals of these seemingly innocuous and uneventful actions suggest instead the theoretical impossibility of such purity. Steven Connor explains this in Heideggerian terms. At the beginning of the second act, the audience witnesses what seems to be a near repetition of the first act. Yet, as Connor argues, we are only cognizant of the return of Vladimir and Estragon’s “being-back (on stage)-again,” or even their “still-being-there” at the beginning of the second Act “because of our awareness of the break that has taken place between the first two Acts.” The break or “absence” that marks the first Act as, at once, the same as and different from the second Act, is enough to allow the “shadow of absence or non-being to fall across the fullness and simplicity of Dasein.”²⁵

Herbert Blau contends that no modern drama is “more sensitively aware of the presence of an audience or its absence”²⁶ than Beckett’s *Godot*. I would suggest that *Godot* is not an exception. I would also add, like Connor, that this sensitivity extends far beyond the level of the audience. Beckettian presence depends upon absence, just as absence in his work relies on presence for the perception of its very existence. Beckett offers his audience an absence which, in the words of Enoch Brater, takes on “a hovering presence.”²⁷ In *Oh les beaux jours* we are only cognizant of Winnie’s “present” or her condition of “still-being-there”—buried in the mound of dirt, rattling on about the objects in her purse—because of the absence

involved in the change in Acts. Presence in this play, as well as in *Godot*—a play in which the title “character” himself is never “present”—can only be perceived by way of its contamination by something “other” than itself.

Derrida argues that any desire for a pure presence, such as that invested in Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty,” is destined to remain unfulfilled precisely because there is no such thing as “pure” presence to begin with: “Presence, in order to be presence and self-presence, has always already begun to represent itself, has always already been penetrated.” Thus, the extent to which Artaud wanted to save the “purity” of presence untainted by “interior difference” and repetition, is the extent to which he simultaneously “desired the impossibility of the theatre.” Derrida is quick, however, to note that Artaud knew this “better than any other.” He knew that the theater of cruelty would always be “the inaccessible limit of a representation which is not repetition, of a re-presentation which is full presence, which does not carry its double within itself as its death, of a present which does not repeat itself, that is, of a present outside time, a non-present.”²⁸

The appearance of a “pure present,” what Vincent Descombes refers to as the Husserlian “*présent vivant*,” is just that: appearance. It is an illusion constructed in order to support phenomenological and metaphysical thought; in particular, the idea that one can distinguish between an original entity and one that is derived. In order to effect a deconstruction of this so-called “husserlian principle of principles,” Derrida counters it with his own “principle of non-principles.”²⁹ Here, one can only conceive of a present or presence either immediately before or immediately after it has happened. The present can only be conceived of as “present” belatedly, and thus any present that does not “carry its double within itself as its death,” is a present outside of time. “The “present” is always already “non-present.” As Descombes explains it, this belated present is thus even responsible for producing history: “*Il y a histoire, parce que dès l’origine, le présent est comme en retard sur lui-même.*” (“There is only history, because, from the origin onwards, the present is, so to speak, always delayed with regard to itself”).³⁰ Whether it is in relation to the present time or the presence of the physical body, “pure presence” is no more than a fantasy. It cannot be re-presented on stage—not by Artaud, nor by Beckett—because “pure” presence does not exist as such.

IV. “Writing is Dirty, Speech is Clean:” The Moralization of Speech and Presence

If the theatre can be perceived as the space of “pure presence” because it allows spectators to witness the presence of physical bodies on stage acting out a text in the present time of the production, it is no less possible to make this same connection between presence and the speech act in the theatre. The stage permits for the possibility of the articulation and reception of speech, which has historically

been associated with presence. Richard Begam argues that this correlation between the speech act and presence stems from the logocentric perception of the body as the original intentional context of the "idea." When one verbally articulates a message in the *presence* of and in the *present time* of another person, there is less chance of the message being misinterpreted than if the message had first been written and read at a later time. The implication, then, is that the body, as the source of the verbal message, is the site at which the "truth" of a message originates.³¹

There is, of course, nothing "original" in characterizing the speech act as representative of presence and the written word as inhabited by absence. Philosophers from Plato to Malebranche to Descartes to Leibnitz to Condillac to Rousseau, and so on, have long made this claim. They argue that writing depends on absence for its very being, since it would not be "present" at all if it were not needed to account for some "originary absence."

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida interrogates the origins of such originary absence linked to the written word. Readers who are familiar with Derrida's work will certainly need no introduction to such a canonical text as *Grammatology*. However, an understanding of the origins of the speech/writing hierarchy is essential in the context of this examination of presence and speech in Beckett's work. The elucidation of certain aspects of this text will thus prove of use to those readers for whom his work is not as well known. In "From/Of the Supplement to the Source," Derrida explains the inauguration of the association of writing with absence by stating that:

... *c'est au moment où la distance sociale . . . s'accroît jusqu'à devenir absence, que l'écriture devient nécessaire. . . . Quand le champ de la société s'étend au point de l'absence, de l'invisible, de l'inaudible, de l'immémorable, quand la communauté locale est disloquée au point que les individus ne s'apparaissent plus les uns aux autres, deviennent sujets d'être imperceptibles, l'âge de l'écriture commence.*

... it is at the moment that the social distance . . . increases to the point of becoming *absence*, that writing becomes necessary. . . . When the field of society extends to the point of *absence*, of the *invisible*, the *inaudible*, and the *immémorable*, when the local community is dislocated to the point where individuals *no longer appear* to one another, become capable of being *imperceptible*, the age of writing begins.³²

While communication in the way of gestures or speech is considered "fully present" and even "originary"³³ because it is intended to be used in the *presence* of the

destinator, writing is meant to signify in the *absence* of both the destinator and the locuteur.

One might imagine that writing would then at least be privileged as an invaluable form of communication *in absentia*. This has not, however, been the case in Western thought. Instead, writing has been regarded not only as the weaker counterpart of speech, but even as a degenerative form of communication, fraught with risk and a potential for perversity—only to be used when absolutely necessary, and only in the “absence” of speech. Derrida claims that this has always been the status of writing in the history of metaphysics: it is but “a debased, lateralized, repressed, displaced theme. . .” The celebrated linguist Ferdinand de Saussure offers one reason for the secondary status of writing in western thought. While the oral sign is the sign of the “inner meaning” of the original thing or idea, the graphic sign is but a sign of the oral sign, and as such it is one additional step removed from the original idea. Thus, although both speech and writing are supplements for some original entity, writing is, as Derrida expresses it, “the supplement par excellence” because it “marks the point where the supplement proposes itself” not simply as a supplement, but as a “supplement of supplement, sign of sign, *taking the place of a speech already significant.*” Writing “marks the place of the initial doubling.”

Derrida notes however that supplementarity is more often than not characterized as being far from innocuous. He argues that writing is not thought of as a simple supplement to speech, but rather as “*the dangerous supplement.*”³⁴ There are several reasons for this designation. The practical explanation states that if a person is not present when what he has written is read, he cannot be sure that the message has been interpreted as it was intended. To commit one’s thoughts to writing, then, is to put one’s message *in danger* of being misunderstood; it is to *risk* the “truth” of the original utterance. Every instance of writing accuses the absence of this original context and so accuses the absence of the “truth” of the original context. Thus, Derrida insists that “the history of truth,” of “the truth of truth,” has always been the “debasement of writing.”³⁵

Derrida argues that while there are “practical” reasons why writing has been traditionally viewed as less desirable than speech—why it is indeed characterized as perilous in comparison—the real reason for the secondary status of writing is ultimately mythic and moral. The sign, Derrida claims, “is always a sign of the Fall.” Any absence “always relates to distancing from God.”³⁶ For someone like Jean-Jacques Rousseau about whom Derrida writes, this translates to a fall into depravity. The “noble savage” of the “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” loses his nobility and innocence with the advent of civilization, representation, and, in particular, writing. Any representation clumsily and excessively conceals or “masks” something “natural,” and in so doing, renders that original and “natural” thing “civilized,” that is to say, frightening, even perverse. This is in fact the argument

Rousseau employs in his critique of the theatre in "Letter to M. d'Alembert." Rousseau explains that one must allow "a lively and frolicsome youth" to partake of innocent and "natural" pleasures such as public gatherings in "open air"—festivals "without object . . . without sacrifice . . . without expense . . . and above all without masks." If, he warns, we do not allow them such innocent pleasures, they invariably "substitut[e] more dangerous ones . . ." One way or another, a choice will be made; children will choose to take part in activities that take place out in open, public spaces, or in private, concealed spaces. For Rousseau, the appropriate decision is quite "clear." While innocent joys "evaporate in the full light of day," vice "is a friend of shadows." For Derrida, the underlying message of Rousseau's argument against concealment is ironically just as transparent. Any "condemnation of masks," he argues, is also "an ambiguous condemnation" of writing.³⁷

V. "Speaking Is Dirty, Writing is Clean:" Revisiting the Speech/Writing Polarity

In a television interview with Claire Parnet, Gilles Deleuze uttered the now (in)famous phrase with which he will perhaps forever be associated: "Speaking is dirty, writing is clean" ("*parler, c'est sale, écrire, c'est propre*"). Notwithstanding the evident incongruity of actually *speaking* such an utterance, Deleuze's aim was to launch a critique against all so-called intellectuals who waste their time speaking instead of thinking, participating in opportunities for "babble," otherwise named "colloquia," rather than carefully organizing and writing down their thoughts. However, in uttering the phrase, "Speaking is dirty, writing is clean," Deleuze also manages to unsettle the age-old speech/writing hierarchy by turning it on its head. Here, it is speech—not writing—that is not only inadequate but even perverse or "dirty."

In his essay "La Différance" in *Marges de la philosophie* Derrida also sets out to undermine these age-old assumptions about speech and writing by demonstrating the inability of speech to account for meaning or for the intent of the speaker. The example he employs is the word "*différance*," which, depending on whether it is spelled with an "a" ("-ance") or an "e" ("-ence"), could mean either "to differ" or "to defer." What makes this word particularly important for his argument is that the difference between the two words—"différance" or "différence"—cannot be heard. It can only be seen. The difference is therefore solely graphic. Thus, when uttering these words in a speech—which Derrida does, as "La Différance" was originally delivered as a speech—there is no way of knowing which meaning is being referred to: "*Je ne peux en effet vous faire savoir par mon discours, par ma parole à l'instant proféré de quelle différence je parle au moment où j'en parle.*" In speech, the "a" remains "silent, secret and discreet as a tomb" ("*il demeure*

silencieux, secret et discret comme un tombeau”). Immediately perceptible in writing alone, this one letter manages to effect a privileging of the written word and to topple the speech/writing hierarchy. As such, this seemingly insignificant “a” has the power to bring about the “death of a dynasty” (“la mort du dynaste”).³⁸

Yet despite their common reversal of the speech/writing binary opposition, Deleuze and Derrida remain very different thinkers, and this difference extends itself to the way in which each theorizes this opposition as well. Where Deleuze reverses the hierarchy—which disturbs the balance of power, but still leaves the hierarchy intact—Derrida destabilizes the hierarchy itself by demonstrating how it is ultimately impossible to decide which term has more power. Simply put, perhaps neither speech nor writing can lay exclusive claim to presence, or for that matter, to absence either.

Derrida comes to this conclusion after investigating the definition of the sign itself. Every sign is a substitute for the thing, idea or person it represents. An oral sign, like its written counterpart, is but a signifier “whose signified is another signifier and never the thing itself” (“*dont le signifié est un autre signifiant, et jamais 'la chose même'*”).³⁹ Regardless of whether it is graphic or oral, the sign can therefore *never* truly lay any claim to presence, because, as Derrida states:

Le signe, dit-on couramment, se met à la place de la chose même, de la chose présente, “chose” valant ici aussi bien pour le sens que pour le référent. Le signe représente le présent en son absence. Il en tient lieu. Quand nous ne pouvons prendre ou montrer la chose, disons le présent, l'étant-présent, quand le présent ne se présente pas, nous signifions, nous passons par le détour du signe.

The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, “thing” here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign.⁴⁰

If the sign represents a present, it can therefore only be a differed presence. All signs, even those belonging to speech, are conceivable “only on the *basis* of a presence that [they] defer and *moving toward* the differed presence that [they] aim to reappropriate” (“*qu'à partir de la présence qu'il diffère et en vue de la présence différée qu'on vise à se réapproprier*”).⁴¹

The absence of presence is not the only property speech and writing have in common. As a result of this lack, they also share the quality of iterability. Due to the potential for its message to be taken out of the particular context in which it

was written (i.e., its potential for repeatability), writing has always been conceived of as “dead” or contaminated by absence. Speech, on the other hand, is considered to be solidly fixed within its original context. Thus unlike writing, which is thought of as nothing but the “sign of a sign,” speech supposedly resists facile quotation. Derrida suggests, however, that the possibility of extraction and “citational grafting” may well constitute not only the condition of writing, but of all language:

Tout signe, linguistique ou non linguistique, parlé ou écrit . . . peut être cité, mis entre guillemets; par là, il peut rompre avec tout contexte donné, engendrer à l’infini de nouveaux contextes, de façon absolument non saturable.

Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written . . . can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion.⁴²

This possibility of being severed from its referent, “cut off from its alleged ‘production’ or origin,” marks every sign, even if oral, as a “grapheme;” it constitutes all signs in advance as writing.⁴³

Regardless of how much one would like to believe that speech is exempt from the constraints of writing, and is independent of writing, the facts are inescapable. Rousseau is the preeminent example, for though he praises the healing properties of presence and speech, he is obliged to concede his own dependence on writing in order to make these thoughts known. Plato too shows his hand in this way, for though the “Symposium” is presented in dialogue form, it was always, and only, a written work. Finally, speech in the theater is always already simultaneously present and represented. Speech and writing are implicated within one another, and the only “illusion” is that “they are two” (“*qu’ils font deux*”).⁴⁴

VI. “Play It Again, Sam:” Presence, Speech and Repetition in Beckett’s Theatrical Productions

Beckett’s so-called “turn”⁴⁵ to the theatre could be perceived less as a desire to simply be in the presence of bodies on stage as a wish to distance himself in a definitive manner from the tyrannical drudgery of the written word. Beckett implied as much when telling Colin Duckworth that he began to write *Godot* “as a relaxation, to get away from the awful prose I was writing at that time.”⁴⁶ Yet the idea that Beckett “turned” to the theatre and away from prose decisively in search of the presence of speech is problematic. While Beckett did concentrate more energy on writing for the stage after completing the trilogy, by no means did he give up writing prose altogether in order to do so. In fact, he continued to write and publish

a significant amount of short prose well into the 1980s. The idea that Beckett turned to the theatre to the exclusion of other writing—that there was some evolutionary “progression” from prose to the theatre—is then simply inaccurate and can only be explained as the result of a conspicuous blindness to at least half of the work he produced from the mid 1950s until his death.

More importantly, Beckett’s treatment of the speech act on stage reveals that he is as suspicious of its supposed natural primacy or claim to presence as he is of the notion of presence itself. His extensive use of silence in both his plays and films suggests this quite readily. *Act Without Words*, *Nacht und Träume* and *Quad* are all productions—the first a play, and the other two telefilms—in which no words are ever uttered. No speech is present. *Film*, on the other hand, features one word, but it is a word that is meant to produce silence alone: “Shhhhh.” Even the plays and telefilms that feature a substantial amount of dialogue manage to question the primacy of speech. The countless refrains uttered by characters like Vladimir and Estragon in *En Attendant Godot*, Winnie in *Oh les beaux jours*, and Hamm, Clov, Nell, and Nagg in *Fin de partie*, undermine any sense of originality in speech. In certain plays, *Fin de partie*, *Embers*, and *Oh les beaux jours*, for example, there are so many pauses incorporated into the script that they rival the words that are actually spoken.

Of all of Beckett’s plays the one that most calls into question the link between speech and presence is *La Dernière bande*. *La Dernière bande* is the “story” of a man who, on his birthday, ritualistically takes out his tape recorder in order to listen to past recordings of his own voice—recordings made on previous birthdays—and to tape present-day impressions of his life and state of being. Initially, thus, this appears to be a play about the “present,” in particular, about the possibility of accessing the present long after the present has ceased to be. By listening to recordings of a past-present in the present-present, and by taping the present-present that is also projected as a future-present, Krapp appears to have found a way to still time and to live in a perpetual present. This is, however, not at all the case. While it would seem that a tape-recorded version of past events could capture a presence that writing could not (if only by bringing the actual voice of a present long since past into the actual present), this is not what takes place in this play. For, although the recorded voice of Krapp as a young man has indeed been fixed within the present in which it was recorded, it can enter the present-present only by virtue of some *thing*; here, a tape recorder. The supposed “immediacy” of the present of the tape recordings is really just a mediated-immediacy, signaling it from the start as a non-immediacy. In fact, even what one would normally call the “present” in this play—the action of Krapp listening to and making recordings—is not a “present” at all. As the very first words of this play tell us, what happens on stage takes place on a late evening “in the future.” Be that as it may, this is something the spectators

would know only if they had previously read the text or if the director chose to highlight this very significant detail in the production.

Although Krapp himself never articulates it as such, he is not ignorant of the effects of the passage of time. While his taped voice manages to stay fixed in the moment in which it was taped, he recognizes that he himself has changed dramatically since the taping and scarcely resembles or even remembers the “stupid bastard [he] took [himself] for thirty years ago.”⁴⁷ The difference between the two versions of himself is evident in the many parts of the play when the older, more cantankerous Krapp attempts to interact and identify with the voice of the more youthful, pompous person he used to be:

The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) And the resolutions! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) To drink less in particular. (*Brief laugh of Krapp alone.*)⁴⁸

Try as he might to correspond fully to his younger self, and thus to repeat a present long past, difference—in the form of time—has already entered the equation, rendering the retrieval of that moment impossible.

Krapp’s memory—or lack thereof—is another confirmation of this impossibility of ever fully recovering the past. Frequently, the older, less mentally agile Krapp has difficulty remembering aspects of what he evidently once knew so well. The business about “the black ball” that he wrote of in his ledger is now as lost to him as the not so-memorable “memorable equinox”:

Hm . . . The black ball . . . (*he raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.*) Black ball? . . . (*He peers again at ledger, reads.*)
The dark nurse . . . (*He raises his head, broods, peers again at ledger, reads.*) . . . Hm . . . Memorable . . . what? (*He peers closer.*) Equinox, memorable equinox. (*He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.*) Memorable equinox?⁴⁹

Hearing the sounds of his voice describing these past feelings and events does little to jog his failing memory. The word “viduity” that he used in reference to his mother and that is repeated on the recording year after year, through time has become somehow “different” and is now as foreign to him as if it had been in another language:

. . . there is of course the house on the canal where mother lay a-dying, in the late autumn, after her long viduity (*KRAPP gives a start*) and the—(*KRAPP switches off, winds back tape a little, bends his ear closer to machine, switches on*)—a-dying, after

her long viduity, and the—(KRAPP switches off, raises his head, stares blankly before him. His lips move in the syllables of 'viduity'. No sound . . .).⁵⁰

The only way he is able to regain at least the semblance of what the younger Krapp once meant by “viduity” is by referring to a text:

(. . . He gets up, goes backstage into darkness, comes back with an enormous dictionary, lays it on the table, sits down and looks up the word.) KRAPP: (Reading from dictionary.) State—or condition—of being—or remaining—a widow—or widower

. . .⁵¹

Yet, even while he is able to find the definition of “viduity” in a text, and thus seems to have found the means with which to regain a past present, in the end the dictionary—because it offers too many possibilities—is just as incapable of recovering the present as the recorded voice had been:

(Pause. He peers again at dictionary. Reading.) Deep weeds of viduity. . . Also of an animal, especially a bird . . . the vidua or weaver-bird . . . Black plumage of male . . . (He looks up. With relish.) The vidua-bird!⁵²

To reinforce the proximity of writing and speech, Beckett shows how similar the recorded voice is to the written text of the ledger. He treats the spoken, recorded word as if it were as transcribed on paper; material, manipulatable, and subject to the breaks in the flow of meaning involved in reading. For example, when Krapp stops in the middle of a word to turn the page of his ledger he obscures the signification of what is being read in the process. With his “*Adieu à l'a . . . (il tourne la page) . . . mour,*” meaning hangs precariously, if only for an instant, between “goodbye to . . . death,” on one hand, and “goodbye to . . . love,” on the other. These breaks in the flow of discourse that are a fact of the very material act of reading are paralleled by the ceaseless hesitations in the spoken discourse captured on the tape recording: “The face she had! The eyes! Like . . . (*hesitates*) . . . chrysolite! (*Pause.*) Ah well . . . (*Pause.*)”⁵³ This, coupled with the maniacally obsessive rewinding and fast-forwarding of the tape also allows Krapp to manipulate the spoken discourse in much the same way as he controls the flow, and thus the meaning, of the written discourse by turning the pages of his book.

Sharing many of the qualities traditionally assigned to writing, speech can no longer lay claim to being the bearer of presence; at least no more so than writing. This is particularly so in a play like *La Dernière bande* in which there is no pure

present to speak of. But even those plays that appear to stage sheer presence reveal with time and with close attention to detail that there is no presence—whether in the form of the body on stage or the spoken word—that is not already tainted in advance by time, consciousness, and mediation. Beckett's supposed turn to the theatre is not indicative of a belief in and desire for a pure presence. Instead, Beckett anticipates what philosophers like Jacques Derrida will later theorize as the unsettling of the speech/writing hierarchy and presents the reader with the very undecidability that lies at the heart of all binary oppositions. Indeed, Samuel Beckett's dramatic texts stage presence, but ultimately it is to expose the notions of presence of being and present time as little more than theoretical impossibilities.

Notes

1. Israel Schenker, "Moody Man of Letters," *New York Times* 6 May 1956, part two, 3.
2. This insistence on Beckett's desire for a presence of the theatre is often justified by citing the self-referential quality of his plays. For example, in "Beckett's Actor" *Modern Drama*, 26:4 [December 1983], William Worthen explains that Beckett's plays clearly intend to focus the attention of the audience on the "essential dynamics of stage performance," the presence and present moment of the performance itself. See also Shimon Levy's *Samuel Beckett's Self-referential Drama* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), and Sidney Homan's *Beckett's Theaters: Interpretations for Performance* (London: Associated University Presses, 1984).
3. Michael Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead: A Study of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1969) 230.
4. Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).
5. My translation. The word "Erholung" also has a health related connotation, meaning "recovery," or "recuperation." From Michael Haerdter, *Materialen zu Becketts Endspiel*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968) 88.
6. My translation.
7. The first two texts feature narrators, as is often the case in Beckett's texts, in a progressive state of degradation. However, in *The Unnamable*, the narrator no longer has a clearly definable human physical form and can hardly comprehend his own limits, exclaiming more than once, "I don't know where I end." He later states that it is not just that he *has* a head, or *is* a head, but that he is *inside* a head. Over the course of a few pages, he has recoiled into something that no longer has a form or is a form, but now exists within form, within the confines of a skull.
8. Marvin Carlson, *Theories of The Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984) 503.
9. Herbert Blau, "Notes from the Underground: *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*," *On Beckett*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1986) 269.
10. Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 236.

11. 234. In this idealized “non-representational theatre” there would be nothing re-presented at all. There would be only “presentation.” Here, the distinction between the audience and the actor would become ambiguous. Derrida notes the resemblance between Rousseau’s “theatre” and Artaud’s “festival” in which there would not be “anything to see” and where the spectators themselves would become “actors” (245).

12. Alain Robbe-Grillet, “Samuel Beckett, or Presence on the Stage,” *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Calder & Boyars, 1965) 119.

13. Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967) 23; translation found in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984) 12.

14. Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* 16.

15. In a conversation with Lois Oppenheim, later published in *Directing Beckett* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994) 55, Herbert Blau distinguishes his manner of directing Beckett’s work with that of Alan Schneider by referring to the latter as one of Beckett’s favorite directors because he was always “very dutiful.” As for himself, Blau asserts that he was in “no way influenced by [Beckett’s] productions,” and was generally “not taken with productions of what, when you read a text, seems pretty much the way you’d do it if you did it straight.” Of course, according to Gerry McCarthy, “playing it straight” is exactly what Beckett expects of and wants from his directors, and any strain between directors and Beckett is the result of a feeling that they must “do it his way” (“Emptying the Theater: On Directing the Plays of Samuel Beckett,” also in *Directing Beckett* 250). In a 1953 letter to Roger Blin, Beckett as much as reprimands Blin for precisely this type of transgression, asking him to “just be kind enough to restore [the scene] as indicated in the text, and as we had agreed upon in rehearsal, and have the trousers fall completely around his ankles” (*Directing Beckett* 297).

16. Beckett 146.

17. 399.

18. This thought was echoed—*avant la lettre*—by Harold Hobson, drama critic for the Sunday Times from 1947-76, in a review published on August 7, 1955, of *Godot*. In a review published on the same date, Kenneth Tynan, drama critic of *The Observer*, labels *Godot* a “dramatic vacuum,” in which one will find “no plot, no climax, no dénouement; no beginning, no middle, and no end.”

19. Vivian Mercier, “The Uneventful Event,” *Irish Times* 18 February 1956, 6.

20. Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1973) 132, 138, 134.

21. Martin Esslin, “A Theatre of Stasis—Beckett’s Late Plays,” *Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1986) 194.

22. *Back to Beckett* 135. In *Just Play* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), Cohn characterizes Beckett’s dramatic speech—with its hesitations, and contradictions—as indicative of a general mistrust of language, and a privileging instead of physical action, adding that “Gesture is apparently keener and cleaner than phrase” (6).

23. Ruby Cohn, “At This Moment in Time,” *Just Play* 36, 46, 49, 50.

24. Cohn, *Back to Beckett* 156.

25. Connor 119.

26. Herbert Blau, "Notes from the Underground: *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*," *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Grove Press, 1986) 261.

27. Enoch Brater, "A Footnote to *Footfalls*: Footsteps of Infinity on Beckett's Narrow Space," in *Critical Essays On Samuel Beckett*, Patrick A. McCarthy, ed. (Boston: C. K. Hall & Co, 1986) 212.

28. Derrida, "The Theatre of Cruelty" 249 and 248. Derrida considers Artaud's theater of cruelty itself—and not simply the desire for pure presence—as an impossibility because the concepts behind it speak less to the theater than to metaphysics. Derrida describes *The Theater and Its Double* as "more a system of critiques shaking the entirety of occidental history than a treatise on theatrical practice" (235).

29. This "principle of non-principles" is strikingly similar to Gilles Deleuze's "paradox of coexistence." As Deleuze articulates it, duration never describes what "is," for that would mean that it names what "exists." Identifying what "exists" is impossible, for in order to do so one would have to freeze the time of the object in question. The "paradox" is therefore the following: in order for a present to be a present as such—to be identified as existing—it must also not be present.

30. Vincent Descombes, *Le Même et l'autre : quarante-cinq ans de philosophie Française (1933-1978)* (Paris: Minuit, 1979) 170. Translation from Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 145.

31. Richard Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996).

32. Derrida, "Du Supplément à la source," *De la grammatologie* 399; Derrida, "From/of Supplement to the Source," *Of Grammatology*, trans. Spivak 281-82.

33. Derrida, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing," *Of Grammatology* 8.

34. Derrida, "From/of the Supplement" 270 and 281. Unlike Derrida, Beckett does not explicitly theorize writing as a supplement. There is, nonetheless, a significant amount of supplementing that takes place on the level of the characters, and particularly in Beckett's novels. The names of the characters in *Molloy*, for example, are substituted for one another willy-nilly: Mrs. Loy becomes Mrs. Lousse; Sophie, who is then confused with Edith, also known as Ruth, who is indistinguishable from Molloy's mother, and so on. However, the real "supplement par excellence" is Molloy himself. For Lousse, he takes the place of her dog, much in the same way "as [the dog] for her had taken the place of a child." With his mother, Molloy participates in something of an exchange: "I took her for my mother," he claims, "and she took me for my father" (17). Yet, at the temporal end of his voyage—the proper beginning of his official narration and the novel—he ceases to stand in for his father, and instead replaces his mother. Although Molloy fails to find his mother—the object of his errant quest—in that he never actually reaches her, he does succeed to a certain extent by standing in for her. "I am in my mother's room," begins the text, "I sleep in her bed. I piss and shit in her pot." "I have," he informs us, "taken her place" (7).

Although the examples of "place-taking" in Beckett's *Molloy* seem to be included more for amusement than anything else, they hint at an underlying darkness involved in supplementing, for the majority of these examples seem to require the death of someone or thing in order to take place. Molloy is only able to take the place of a father who is dead, an equally dead dog and an "apparently" dead mother—though he is unsure whether or not she is indeed dead "enough to bury" (7).

35. Derrida, "Exergue," *Of Grammatology* 3.

36. Here Derrida provides the example of Rousseau's condemnation of writing in "The Social Contract," where representation leads to the loss of personal freedom, "*à l'instant qu'un peuple se donne des Représentants, il n'est plus libre; il n'est plus*" ("the moment a people allows itself to be represented, it is no longer free; it no longer exists"). But while this is true of all forms of representation, it is because of the written word—the "decree" that can be substituted for a law—that "the general will becomes mute." Threatened in advance by "the letter," the body politic "begins to die as soon as it is born, and carries in itself the cases of its destruction." As Derrida concludes, writing is for Rousseau the very "origin of inequality" ("From/Of the Supplement" 297); 283.

37. Rousseau offers as an example the case of nudity in art. Nudity, in itself, is a "natural" state. Thus, artistic representations of nudity are not in and of themselves perverse. But if some small item of clothing is added to the representation of the nude—masking one part of the body but not another—the image is corrupted. "Statues and paintings only offend the eyes when a mixture of clothing renders the nudity obscene." ("*Ne sait-on pas que les statues et les tableaux n'offensent les yeux que quand un mélange de vêtements rend les nudités obscènes?*" Rousseau, "Lettre to M. d'Alembert" 232, from Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* 436, and *Of Grammatology* 309); Derrida, "From/Of the Supplement" 308 and 353n31.

38. Jacques Derrida, "La différance," *Marges de la philosophie*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972) 4; English translation: "Difference," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982) 4.

39. Descombes 172; English translation from Descombes, trans. Scott-Fox and Harding 147.

40. Derrida, "La différence" 9; and "Difference," trans. Bass 9.

41. 9.

42. Derrida, "Signature événement contexte," *Marges de la philosophie* 381. English translation: "Signature Event Context," *Margins of Philosophy* 320.

43. Derrida, "Signature Event Context" 318.

44. "La Différance" 5 and "Difference" 5.

45. Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* 129.

46. Ruby Cohn, "Waiting," *Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986) 153.

47. Samuel Beckett, "Krapp's Last Tape," *Complete Dramatic Works* 222.

48. 218.

49. 218.

50. 219.

51. 219.

52. 219.

53. 220.

