

REVIEWS

Beckett's Politics of Space

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A BA thesis by Seth Eggenschwiller of the University of Ohio, published online in 2021, opened with the assertion that “Samuel Beckett avoided political theater to the best of his ability. He strived to make his plays timeless and universal rather than actionable and contemporary,” going on to reference Martin Esslin’s *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962) and state that “Beckett was arguably the primary playwright behind this movement [The Absurd]” (1). Given that *The Theatre of the Absurd* was published sixty years ago, it is indicative of the pervasiveness of Esslin’s reading that the argument is “deep existential anguish” which is “the keynote of Beckett’s work” (30) still has currency, with specific social issues, such as the question of Beckett’s Irishness, being marginal concerns at best. All the more reason to welcome James Little’s *Samuel Beckett in Confinement: The Politics of Closed Space*, a new addition to a number of works, chiefly by younger scholars, which through rigorous archival research presents a Beckett whose work, in Little’s words, “does not constitute an evasion of political concerns” (3). In this Little consolidates the readings advanced by Emilie Morin’s *Beckett’s Political Imagination*, (2017) whose subject is “not simply Beckett’s political sensibility but the political imagination that continued to shape the work” (27) and James McNaughton’s *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* (2018), which “presents a writer

who is politically alert in specific historical moments” (3). Little adds his own individual reading to this developing area of Beckett criticism, the aim of his book as a whole being to show “the specific ways in which the spatial forms of confinement allowed Beckett to expand the field in which political interpretation takes place” (11).

In the year before Esslin’s study, Theodor Adorno’s essay “Trying to Understand *Endgame*” (1961) did give a specific rather than generalized cause for the condition of being dramatized by Beckett, arguing that in the play “a historical moment is revealed” (122), specifically the destruction effected by World War II with Beckett’s trashcans being “the emblem of a culture restored after Auschwitz” (143). Adorno, however, reads Beckett as staging the symptoms of a historical moment rather than having a committed engagement with the condition and its amelioration. Indeed, he concludes, it is “ridiculous to have him testify as a key political witness” (125).

In large part this denial of politics in Beckett has been because of assumptions about the appropriate theatrical form in which politics can be addressed. A once prevalent opposition was between Beckett and Brecht—conventionally, the one the observer of the generalized human condition, the other the theatrical activist engaged in the specific social moment. The difference, as Georg Lukacs expressed it in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957) is that as Beckett, like other modernists, sees social reality as unalterable, humanity in his work is “rendered impotent and robbed of meaning” (36). In the words of Edward Bond, one of the most Brechtian of contemporary dramatists, “I am made weary by the theatre of Beckett because it is written with great care and artistry, yet nothing comes of it except pity” (23).

As noted above, more recent work has brought more nuanced approaches to Beckett so that politics and social issues more broadly are now firmly on the critical agenda. Emilie Morin’s *Beckett’s Political Imagination* detailed his personal commitment to a range of specific causes but as Fintan O’Toole asked in his review of her book, “Why, given Beckett’s immersion

in many of the major political issues of his time, why is politics approached so obliquely? Why is he not more politically engaged *in his work*?" (emphasis in the original). Little aims to refute this view, arguing that "in using the spatial form of confinement, Beckett redefines what it means to interpret political allusions in closed space" (10).

What follows is an impressive *tour d'horizon* which traces Beckett's concern with a carceral space in the novels through to theatre work where space is the very medium of the genre. Key to the understanding of this progression is the concept of "vaugening," which Little adopts from Rosemary Pountney, or "undoing," which he takes from Stanley Gontarski. In this movement, which Little is careful not to express as unproblematically linear, there is a shift, as seen by Nicholas Grene, from "the Dublin-landmarked stories of *More Kicks Than Pricks*" to the nameless spaces of the later works (129). While the first four of the nine chapters, which focus on the early essays and the novels, are read in meticulous detail, there is a sense that they are really a preparation for the study of the plays and theatre pieces. In an analysis of theater work from *Waiting for Godot* (1953) to *Catastrophe* (1982) and "Mongrel Mime," Little reveals how Beckett progressively "vaguened" the location of his precisely realized stage spaces, using "the invisible otherness implied by visible theatre space to stage political themes associated with confinement" (91). Here Little contends that Beckett's stage spaces are fully engaged with their social moment, providing a series of sophisticated analyses which are alert to the physical realities of performance and not simply to the production potential inherent in the dramatic text.

As Beckett wrote in response to the directors of a proposed 1973 German production of *Endgame* (1957): "I am totally opposed to your idea of bringing *Endgame* up to date in an old people's home . . . This play can only function if performed strictly as written and in accordance with its stage directions" (qtd. in Little 110). This is echoed in his comments in an affidavit served on a 1984 American production which seemed to suggest a location in New York's subway system: "Any production of *Endgame* which ignores my stage directions is completely

unacceptable to me” (qtd. in Badham). This has come to be seen by some directors—for the injunction continued after Beckett’s death—as the dead controlling hand which destroys their creativity. This position is articulated in a review by Van Badham of a 2015 Australian production of *Endgame* which she judged to be just a now-stale cliché and concluded: “If you want to see a Beckett work that lives, you’re gonna have to wait until they pass into the public domain. In 2059.” However, the point that Little brings out so clearly is that the more the on-stage set is rendered as a specific place, the more it evokes an off-stage reality, but “by cutting references to the outer world in his own productions, Beckett intensified the sense of enclosure on which the play thrives, and it is essential that we as an audience do *not* identify [the off stage world] . . . which would in turn help us to positively identify the hell we see in front of us” (108). Far from being a limitation to the political resonances of the plays, it is the fact that Beckett’s stage world is “vaguely defined” (108) that allows his work to have relevance in different contexts and at different times. So, to take *Waiting for Godot* as an example, it can be staged meaningfully in besieged Sarajevo in the Bosnian war, New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina, and New York during the Occupy Wall Street protests. While there might have been specific political points about incarceration in the plays’ origins, these *pentimenti*—a term from painting referring to earlier images or brush stroke on the canvas, which can be revealed by the use of infra-red reflectograms and X-rays—shadow rather than impose themselves on the completed work. And above all, in preferably small proscenium arch theaters with the invisible fourth wall. This, as Beckett made clear, was so that it made the audience feel as trapped as the characters. Here Beckett refashions the theater form associated with realism for avant-garde objectives and it is in his overstating the proscenium arch—as in *Endgame*—or subverting it—as in *Not I* (1972)—that he constantly shows us characters trapped and confined. As Little points out, after *Happy Days* (1961) where Winnie is buried in the mound of sand, six

of the next nine theater works fix their characters in place, immobile in urns, on chairs, or under spotlights.

What is then drawn out so meticulously in *Samuel Beckett in Confinement* is the playwright's rigorous refinement of stage space, stripping away, "vaguening" or "undoing," resisting specificity in order to achieve greater resonance. In Beckett's words: "As much precision as possible. But minimum of explications" (qtd. in Little 207). Gratifyingly, Little follows Beckett only in part, giving us both precision and explication in a book that adds substantially to our understanding, not simply of Beckett, but the functioning of theatre as a fundamentally spatial medium.

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