

SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE WORLD OF THE UNWORD

Silvia Osman*

silviaosman.s@gmail.com

Abstract: *Samuel Beckett succeeded on changing, forever, profoundly and surprisingly, the form and shape of modern theater writing and performing. If the twentieth century witnessed the revolt of the novel and poetry against canonical writing, the theater couldn't be left out of sharing the **modern Zeitgeist**, yearning for innovation and change. The unique thing about the Beckettian Theater is that it represents a moment of total shift in the general perception of the theatrical experience, being considered, by many critics "revolutionary". Rightfully earning the reputation of the unique inheritor of the Joycean tradition², giving up words as vehicles of content and renouncing the **intricateness** of precious writing style, Samuel Beckett advocated for a **literature of the unword**. His favorite themes, such as the waiting, senectute, loneliness or death, with no mistifications and euphemisms, introduce Samuel Beckett to his readers and audiences worldwide both as a moral and undoubtably valuable author. This might be why theorist, writer and theater critic Martin Esslin defined him as a „moral and intellectual force of the twentieth century.³“ To write about Samuel Beckett you have to be able to cross the bridge between the surrounding world and the stage that softens it, following the trail left behind by him. To write about him, about the genial Samuel Beckett, is as if you willingly sign up to follow a path of an eternal return, a curb of a perpetual rehearsal, always new and forever the same.*

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, a young, intelligent Irish man, full of ambition and enthusiasm, questions and uncertainties, decides to leave his homeland to spend one year in Paris. This trip to the city of lights proved to be an experience that influenced his life forever: the Parisian charm subdued and enchained him for a lifetime. Talented and eccentric, erudite and smitten with love for literature, our young man finds in the French cultural avant-garde a group of writers, poets, playwrights, painters and artists of all kinds and decides wholeheartedly to join them. In the excitement of those peculiar days, the young Irishman reads Dujardin's novel *Les lauriers sont coupés* (written in 1888) and is totally fascinated by the way in which the author uses the interior monologue. He starts to experiment himself this newly discovered technique⁴, improves and merges it harmonically within his own writing, focalizing the stream of ideas flowing like a river of life through the minds of his characters on a complex, solid, rigorous structure. He plans and succeeds, as well, to establish a logical parallel between an easily recognizable myth and the (in)action of his newly shaped novel, which takes place in one day. The Irishman proceeds afterwards to erase with the power of his creative genius the natural boundaries placed by human logic between past and present and refuses to be

* Lecturer, "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University, Bucharest

¹ Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought*, op.cit., p.148

² Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought*, op.cit., p.145

³ **Martin Esslin** – *În dialog despre universul beckettian*, *Secolul 20*, nr. 298-299-300 / 1995, p. 62

⁴ *Stream of consciousness*

subdued and confined by traditional rules of writing and commonsensical, formal constraints. Looking back at his creation, in an almost Godlike manner, decides (with a smile, I think) that all has been well done. From that moment on, there was no turning back anymore: the new, beautiful century of literary novelties was dawning over Europe, flashing its light over the entire world!

The young Irishman was **James** (Augustine Aloysius) **Joyce** (1882 – 1941), and the novel which he was going to publish in Paris in 1922, *Ulysses*, was about to change, forever, the way in which the writing of a novel was viewed, as well as the general perception of the novel as a literary genre. TS Eliot and Ernest Hemingway consider, almost immediately, the novel as the work of a genius, and the American critic and writer Ezra Pound expresses openly his appreciation, receiving *Ulysses* with critical enthusiasm and admiration. Therefore, ***Bloomsday***, the day in which the novel takes place, becomes the official starting date of Modernism in the history of English literature.

The Parisian artistic life received warmly and enthusiastically the stylistic novelty brought on by Joyce's novel, but a too stern literary censorship deprived his Irish countrymen of the esthetic joy of this work of art. Joyce's *Ulysses* saw the first light of day in Britain after 14 years and after more than 50 years in Ireland! This new type of writing revolutionized the structure of the modern novel and forced language to leap over its previous, logical, natural boundaries.

What James Joyce succeeded on doing for the English modern novel, **Thomas Stearns Eliot** did for the poetry. TS Eliot, an American born writer, poet and playwright published ***The Wasteland*** in 1922, the same year in which Joyce launched ***Ulysses*** in Paris. ***The Wasteland*** is a five part poem, with a magnificent structure, closely emulating the structure of the Wagnerian symphonies. Thomas Stearns Eliot uses the interior monologue in an almost Joycean manner, gets rid of the stylistic pomposity of poetry writing, frees speech, and gives up the confinement of punctuation signs and poetical canonical rigors. He uses as nobody else did before him abundant archetypal images, which permeate and convey, constantly and continuously, through apparently simple, common words, unexpected nuances and surprising emotional intensities. Using intertextuality and multiple allusions to ancient canonical works of art within the refined texture of his poetical interior monologue, he leads, like Ariadne's thread, his eclectic audience through a labyrinth of writings and exquisite works of art, part of our universal cultural heritage.

These exceptional artists share some common features, among which the extensive references to multiple prestigious texts and to centuries of literature and of art, and a particular richness of symbols and archetypal images used in their creations.

Samuel Beckett, the playwright, adds on to this exquisite list of modern creators his share of genius. He will succeed on changing, forever, profoundly and surprisingly, the form and shape of modern theater writing and performing. If the twentieth century witnessed the revolt of the novel and poetry against canonical writing, the theater couldn't be left out of sharing the modern *Zeitgeist*, yearning for innovation and change.

Between unprecedented bloodsheds and social turmoil, the artistic sensitivity of this wonderfully great century, time of gigantic artistic personalities, couldn't possibly bear the inertia of structures, regardless of how efficient or useful they might have been in and for the past. The tumultuous historical past, filled with unprecedented violent events, which the 20th century brought along, was finally required to sit tight in the humankind's

treasure chest, over which the lid of forgiveness and forgetfulness needed to be pressed. Nevertheless, these political, historical and societal hardships, reflected more or less accurately in the written pages of the time, made their way through audiences worldwide, changing forever the way in which art was viewed, perceived and interpreted. In the first decades of the 1920s, a visionary artist, novelist Virginia Woolf was writing in her essay „*Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*”, that “...in or about 1920 the human spirit changed”⁵. For sure, this significant transformation Virginia Woolf made reference to, could be clearly traced and recognized in the works of art born under the pressure of two world wars, social calamities and major turmoil, passions and ambitions, furies and cultural and societal clashes.

Since then, the entire world changed, insidiously, greatly and irreversibly, its face.

As well as T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, the playwright, benefited from an exquisite education. He was very well read, and he moved among ideas with the ease of an exegete; he passed by like a chimera through a century filled with upheavals, wars and bloodshed and made his way into the memory of posterity transforming the nothingness in textual substance. He always spoke his mind and never refrained from claiming that nothing had sense and that we lived in the absurd. He wrote against everybody and against himself, sacrificing even the last resort of a writer facing time: that of writing to be read.

His *Manifest Theater* flashed through the world, revolutionizing it, breaking patterns and uprooting conventions. Samuel Beckett wasn't afraid of rejecting the theories of those who wrote about him, baffling their savant explanations, which, once revealed, would've shattered the aura of secrecy and mystery he so well and so carefully had crafted around his works. The unique thing about the Beckettian Theater is that his dramatic work represents a moment of total shift in the general perception of the theatrical experience, being considered, by many critics “revolutionary”⁶. Rightfully earning the reputation of the *unique inheritor of the Joycean tradition*⁷, giving up words as vehicles of content and renouncing the intricateness of precious writing style, Samuel Beckett advocated for a ***literature of the unword***.

Beckett's plays circled the earth, translated either from French or from English, in over sixteen languages. Nevertheless, Samuel Beckett is an exponent of the Theater of the Absurd insufficiently encountered on stage by the Romanian public. His favorite themes, such as the waiting, senectute, loneliness or death, with no mistifications and euphemisms, introduce Samuel Beckett to his readers and audiences worldwide both as a moral and undoubtably valuable author. This might be why theorist, writer and theater critic Martin Esslin defined him as a „*moral and intellectual force of the twentieth century*.”⁸

The uniqueness of such an author needs no other confirmation. Undoubtable is also the need to know more and more profoundly about the intricate, inner resorts that aliment this type of creativity, renewing and reinventing it, perpetuously.

Samuel Beckett was an author a way ahead of his time. Amazingly, but true, he needed three years to find a director for his famous play, *Waiting for Godot*. The type of

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, p.12

⁶ Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought*, op.cit., p.148

⁷ Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought*, op.cit., p.145

⁸ **Martin Esslin** – *În dialog despre universul beckettian*, *Secolul 20*, nr. 298-299-300 / 1995, p. 62

minimalist theater he wrote and proposed, and the open symbols he left pending for the spectator to interpret and understand, brought him a smashing success.

Five years after his premiere at *Théâtre de Babylone* (Paris), it is said that one million spectators viewed already *Waiting for Godot*, directed by brilliant Roger Blin⁹.

The permanent desire for change of the wonderful century we are populating nowadays with our needs, wishes and ideas about beauty, would never forgive neither creation nor creator refusing to renew themselves, or incapable of a Phoenix like rebirth into modernity. Samuel Beckett, with his “*the same anew*”, just like James Joyce, have the immortality of those few, very well aware of their one of a kind, genial uniqueness. The message Beckett and his manifest theater have to offer to the generations of youngsters, citizens of the twenty-first century, preserves its freshness and adequacy. Therefore, he can be better understood today, in the era of the internet and virtual communication than half a century ago.

In Samuel Beckett’s world nothing happens, because nothing is new anymore: everything already has happened, and we need to be wise enough to accept things we cannot change. To be able to understand Beckett and his plays, we need to start first by understanding ourselves, to reconcile our lives with our hopes and to continue to wait, as for Godot, crossing, once in a while the narrow path bridging world and stage, bearing our days and burdens alike, emulating maybe, at times, Sisyphus, the ancient hero.

The outside world viewed Samuel Beckett, the creator, the director, the complex and complete artist, as a stern and elusive, eccentric and indecipherable character. His friends appreciated his generosity, great sense of humor, compassion for the human suffering, and deep love for all that’s human. His coworkers, actors, directors, biographers, academia, people interested in his work, without exception, described him as always benevolent and delicate, sensitive and discrete. Beckett seems to have been all those things and a little bit more on top of everything else: a kindred spirit, of a one of a kind vulnerability, a creative individual, who struggled to accept and cope with his own vision over a somber and cold world, with which he couldn’t openly engage in an out-front confrontation, and therefore he transformed it in art.

To write about Samuel Beckett you have to be able to cross the bridge between the surrounding world and the stage that softens it, following the trail left behind by him. To write about him, about the genial Beckett, is as if you willingly sign up to follow a path of an eternal return, a curb of a perpetual rehearsal, always new and forever the same.

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⁹ L.Oppenheim, *Directing Beckett*, p. 324.

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