

Samuel Beckett and the Presence of Memory

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Lois Oppenheim approaches the work of Samuel Beckett from a psychoanalytic point of view in the article "A Preoccupation With Object Representation: The Beckett–Bion Case Revisited." Oppenheim asks, "why would an author endowed with as rich a visual memory as Beckett's place the preoccupation with memory, the anxiety of remembrance, at the forefront of his art? . . . To what extent, more precisely, might there be a disturbance in object representation deriving from pathology in the writer's own inner representational world?"¹ In order to answer this question, Oppenheim brings Wilfred Bion, Beckett's psychiatrist, to the forefront.

In 1933, Beckett suffered a series of misfortunate events. Beckett's father had recently died of a heart attack. He had just broken up with paramour Lucia Joyce (James Joyce's daughter), after she began suffering from mental illness. Beckett himself began to suffer from depression and eventually had a breakdown. "His depression expressed itself in endless unshiftable colds and flu, boils and cysts and panic attacks accompanied by palpitations and sensations of suffocation."² No longer able to cope, he resigned from his position at Trinity College Dublin. In 1934, he started what would be two years of Jungian psychotherapy with Wilfred Bion in Tavistock Clinic in London. Given the larger-than-life personalities of both individuals, it is very likely that, after their initial meeting, Bion's ideas influenced Beckett's creative writing, and meeting Beckett influenced Bion's theoretical work.



Some have suggested that Beckett's obsession with memory in his plays stems from his occasional problems with creative blockages. Oppenheim notes that there is an "anxiety of remembrance" and a "preoccupation with object representation" that pervades his work. Oppenheim theorises: "the general favouring of the visual over the verbal may be seen as a sort of aesthetic solution to or compensation for the creative blockages to which the author was painfully inclined."³

Oppenheim argues that some critics, who have attempted to make reciprocal connections between Beckett and Bion's writings, have gone too far. For example, Bennett Simon calls them "imaginary twins,"⁴ and suggests that Beckett had an influence on the later writings of Bion—as much of an influence as Bion had on Beckett's writings. Oppenheim writes: "Where is the proof? The drawing of parallels between Beckett and Bion's writings can be useful for the study of the one or the other's work. But to go beyond the recognition of similarities is reckless."⁵ She reminds us that there is no evidence of what Bion's actual diagnosis of Beckett was, and if there ever was, the evidence was most probably lost in the bombing of Tavistock Clinic during World War II.

On the other hand, Oppenheim argues, regardless of our inability to prove the exact relationship between Beckett and Bion, there may be some utility in applying concepts from Bion's work to Beckett's plays. Oppenheim writes:

There is a sense in which Bion's thinking, if not a direct influence on Beckett's, provides a genuinely useful way into the writer's work. Certain of Bion's theoretical formulations, such as the transformative nature of psychoanalytic interpretation and writing and attacks on linking, have correlates in Beckett well worth exploring. In fact, they provide an effective context in which to consider intriguing aspects of the fiction and plays. The perplexing relation between Beckett's very visual writing and a preoccupation throughout his work with evocative memory and object representation is one.⁶

Another factor that contributes to confusion in this debate is that it is not entirely clear who may have influenced whom. Bion's article "Attacks on Linking," referenced by Oppenheim above as the point of correlation between the two writers, was first published in 1959. Of the four major Beckett plays—the publication dates for *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Endgame* (1957), and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958)—predate Bion's article. Only *Happy Days* (1961) was published after. If there was an influence, did Beckett's ideas influence Bion's, or vice versa? Because the inception of the ideas of theorists and artists often precede their publication by many

years, we may never know. Nevertheless, this problem does not take away the value of exploiting the connection as a tool for literary analysis.

Although Oppenheim is cautious when it comes to giving Beckett credit for Bion's later work, and vice versa, she is more than enthusiastic about the implications of using Bion's ideas as "critical tools"⁷ for understanding both how Beckett's plays are constructed and how they work on stage. Thus, this paper explores Beckett's major plays, using Oppenheim's suggestion to employ Bion's theories as critical tools for understanding them. An analysis using this approach reveals a key for understanding hidden dramaturgical strategies that form the foundation of Beckett's writing.

Projective Identification and Attacks on Linking

The main tool for analysis of Beckett's plays employed in the current study is derived from Wilfred Bion's paper, "Attacks on Linking," published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1959. It is here that we find clues about the "disturbance in object representation" that Oppenheim suggests is pervasive in Beckett's work. Bion's theories rely heavily on Melanie Klein's concept of "projective identification," which Bion defines as "the mechanism by which parts of the personality are split off and projected onto external objects."⁸ In the original context, this mechanism is discussed in relation to patients Bion has diagnosed with "borderline psychosis." Although Oppenheim suggests that Beckett may have had a "pathological disturbance" in the form of memory problems, the purpose of the present project is not to diagnose Beckett's psychological state. Rather, it is to use this concept as a window through which we can better see the internal mechanisms of the dramaturgy of Beckett's plays.

The point of connection between projective identification and Beckett's dramaturgy is what Bion calls "visual" and "invisible" objects. In "Attacks on Linking," Bion describes detailed examples drawn from the psychoanalysis of two of his patients. (Is one of them Beckett? Because Bion took steps to protect their anonymity, we may never know.) In one example, he describes a subject experiencing "invisible-visible hallucinations." The man describes a "stabbing attack from inside" accompanied by a vision of "blue haze."⁹ In another example, a patient hallucinates that "a piece of iron had fallen on the floor" in conjunction with him stating that he "felt like he was being murdered."¹⁰ In a third episode, a man describes his phobia of falling asleep because he is afraid he might dream. Bion reports "visual hallucinations of invisible objects" originating from the dreams and hypothesises: "The objects appearing in experiences which we call dreams



are regarded by the patient as solid and are, as such, contrasted with the contents of the dreams which were a continuum of minute, invisible fragments."¹¹

In other words, Bion diagnoses these subjects with a psychosis evidenced by their tendency to create a link between "invisible" memories, thoughts, emotions, fears, and dreams, and "visible" objects that they hallucinate. Furthermore, Bion theorises a "paranoid-schizoid phase," which arises from "attacks on the link."¹² These attacks on linking take the form of negative thoughts directed toward his parents, resulting in "excessive projective identification by the patient and a deterioration of his developmental process."¹³ Bion concludes:

These objects, whether internal or external, are in fact part-objects and predominantly, though not exclusively, what we should call functions and not morphological structures . . . therefore [this] tends to produce, in the sophisticated mind of the analyst, an impression that the patient's concern is with the nature of the concrete object.¹⁴

Using theatrical terms, one might say that the patients are creating a "presence" out of "absence," and then attacking links that are attached to that presence. In Beckett's plays, we see a correlated link between "invisible objects," or absences—namely thoughts, emotions and dreams derived from Beckett's obsession with memory—and "visible objects," or presences, that the audience sees on stage.

On Presence and Absence

Stanton B. Garner notes in his article, "'Still Living Flesh': Beckett, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenological Body," that there is a recent trend in Beckett scholarship to reposition the works of the artist as part of the poststructuralist program. The author writes: "Challenging 'the metaphysics of presence,' deconstruction has attacked the notions of constituting subjectivity and self-presence, as well as such binary categories as subject and object, inside and outside, the essential and the sensory."¹⁵ Such repositionings, it is claimed, are largely supported by the recurring theme of absence in Beckett's works.

In the article "Representation and Absence," Yuan Yuan states: "Clearly, *Waiting for Godot* is structured and dominated by absence."¹⁶ Paul Lawley adapts a similar stance in his article "Counterpoint, Absence and the Medium in Beckett's *Not I*." Lawley hypothesises: "The counterpoint between stage and text enacts the play's fundamental conflict: between the need to deny the imperfect self and to maintain, even in agony a fictional

other, and the wish for oblivion which would come with the acknowledgement of the fragmented self.”¹⁷

Victoria Stevens uses a similar argument in her discussion of the Bion / Beckett connection in “Nothingness, No-thing, and Nothing in the Work of Wilfred Bion and in Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy*.” Like Yuan and Lawley, Stevens focuses on the theme of absence, this time in an attempt to draw a parallel between the work of Bion and Beckett. Stevens begins by breaking down Bion’s conception of catastrophe, a term that later appears as the title of one of Beckett’s plays, and further evidence that Beckett was versed in the terminology of Bion’s work. She claims, “For Bion, our psychological ‘birth’ involves an experience of catastrophe wherein the unformed, unnamed, unknown is struggling to be born, and whose birth is dependent upon the ability to tolerate nothing in the form of absence.”¹⁸ Stevens then turns to a discussion of Beckett’s novel *Murphy*. In the story, the main character is preoccupied with a form of sensory deprivation in which he ties himself to a chair and rocks himself catatonic in the darkness.

Stevens’ analysis of the character of *Murphy* takes place primarily on a psychoanalytic level. She sees Murphy as a man who is indecisively caught in an oscillation between mind and body. She argues that Murphy’s uncertainty is a symptom of the inability to deal with absence. She claims of Beckett: “His writing itself contains the paradox of giving voice to the problem of the lack of a voice and putting into words what is experienced as wordless.”¹⁹ Finally, she concludes: “Inherent in the concept of naught as a form of nothing is the open space for creative symbolic representations which represent nothing and therefore allow emptiness, absence and nothing to be thought about and transformed.”²⁰

While such interpretations of Beckett’s works are interesting and provocative, arguments that privilege absence over presence miss a crucial element in Beckett’s work. The theme of absence throughout Beckett’s plays is undeniable, but to say that these plays rest solely on absence is reductive. Beckett’s fragmentations of self depend on absence, but the efficacy of these fragmentations depends even more on the play between presence and absence. Beckett often sets up existential metaphors that often serve to exercise a multi-focal contemplation of self as object as well as self as being. Thus, Beckett’s dramaturgy can be seen as based on the way that he is able to manifest the presence of absence—a very elusive, abstract idea—physically on the stage. This is especially seen in the way Beckett brings “presence” to the otherwise elusive, evanescent, and “absent” phenomenon of human memory.

Of course, an understanding of absence serves the purpose in illuminating certain aspects of Beckett’s plays that might otherwise go



unnoticed. For example, in the play *Happy Days*, Willie is clearly an emblem of absence. In his correspondence with Alan Schneider, who directed the world premiere of *Happy Days* at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City in 1961, Schneider asked Beckett a question about the character Willie: "Gather you don't want us to see Willie in entirety at all until the end of the play; until then, we see only an arm, a hand, the paper, the back of his head, etc."²¹ Beckett's response to Schneider clearly shows that Willie should be absented from the scene. Beckett responded: "Willie invisible, need not move at all, except to sit up etc. till end of play."²²

However, it is not only *absence* that should be concerned with in Beckett's plays, but rather *presencing* of absence, as well as the *absencing* of presence. On the one hand, we see the presencing of absence in the way that objects of memory become objects of contemplation in the real world. On the other hand, those same physical, embodied objects become a metaphor for death and decay, growing older and breaking down, as they are inevitably obliterated by the end of the play.

Therefore, the utilisation of presence and absence in the plays of Beckett should not be seen as binary categories, or even as sides of the same coin. Beckett's symbols are multivalent and open, as there is typically more than one possible interpretation for the meaning of each object. There is an ever-shifting interrelation between absence and presence, a pulling apart and a putting back together. Beckett's symbols and metaphors interrogate this binary, by presencing the reader with presences that are absent, and absences that are present; presences that are present, and absences that are absent. Following the work of Oppenheim and exploring the Bion-Beckett connection, perhaps one can expose the mechanisms through which this play of presence and absence is achieved.

Waiting for Godot

In *Waiting for Godot*, the presencing of memory is manifested through the given circumstances, as well as through the objects and the characters that inhabit the world of the play. The stage directions at the beginning read, simply: "A country road. A tree. Evening."²³ In *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, biographer James Knowlson discusses Beckett's reaction to the London production of *Waiting for Godot*, directed by Peter Hall. Recounting a conversation he had with Beckett's friend and director Alan Schneider, who went to see the production with Beckett, Knowlson explains: "Beckett disapproved of the use of music in the production, hated the cluttered stage set ('it must be like a Salvator Rosa landscape')."²⁴ Rather than this clutter, which Beckett apparently disliked, the play should

depend on the simplicity of the single setting—confining by its simplicity—two men standing on the side of a road next to a tree. Beyond that, the men are inescapably trapped in a situation from which they cannot escape. The refrain that is repeated throughout the play echoes these conditions of entrapment:

ESTRAGON: Charming spot. (He turns, advances to front, halts facing auditorium.) Inspiring prospects. (He turns to Vladimir.) Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.²⁵

Thus, this deceptively simple set is itself an existential metaphor—a visible object of contemplation in which the ideas and memories that comprise the play are, as with the “invisible-visible hallucinations” of Bion's patients, projected onto.

Insight into the use of metaphor in Beckett's plays can be gleaned from his correspondence with Schneider, published in the book *No Author Better Served*. During the Beckett Festival in New York City in 1972, Schneider wrote to Beckett explaining that he had been misquoted in an article appeared in the *New York Times*: “When I wouldn't tell him what NOT I was ‘about,’ he took what I said out of context and twisted it to fit his own theories. I said that it was your latest play and, as you had been doing from GODOT through all of your plays up to PLAY, was using theatrical metaphor in a very special way.”²⁶ This quote is revealing, in that it suggests Schneider may have been under instructions from Beckett to be somewhat coy about the “meaning” of Beckett's plays. Furthermore, it suggests that Beckett had a specific strategy in mind for the use of metaphor in his plays, and had informed Schneider of this “very special” use of metaphor. Perhaps this is connected to the use of metaphor as a physical, present grounding point for elusive philosophical ideas, or as Bion might put it, making “invisible” objects “visible” through the use of projective identification.

In the second act of the play, the stage directions read “Next day. Same time. Same place.”²⁷ Even the single tree by the side of the road becomes magnified by the situation. The only thing that has changed is the tree: “The tree has four or five leaves.”²⁸ Yet, the protagonists have a hard time remembering the place, despite the fact that they were there the day before, perhaps many days before, and for many days to come.

VLADIMIR: The tree, look at the tree.

Estragon looks at the tree.

ESTRAGON: Was it not there yesterday?

VLADIMIR: Of course it was there. Do you not remember? We nearly hanged ourselves from it. But you wouldn't. Do you not remember?

ESTRAGON: You dreamt it.

VLADIMIR: Is it possible you've forgotten already?

ESTRAGON: That's the way I am. Either I forget immediately or I never forget.²⁹

Here, one can clearly see the intersection of Beckett's anxiety of remembrance with the characters in his play. Didi and Gogo see the tree and are reminded of a memory—how they tried to hang themselves from the tree. The tree becomes a present symbol for the memory of the attempted suicide.

For all of its minimalism, *Godot* is a play packed with props, from Estragon's boots at the beginning, to his trousers at the end. The characters wear the same bowler hats, confuse turnips for carrots, and ruminate on chicken bones. Like the tree, the bones are examples of multivalent symbols. The bones are a representation of nourishment discarded by Pozzo, then begged for and sucked clean by Estragon. Yet the bones are also symbolic of death. In the second act, when Pozzo and Lucky return blind and dumb they speak of the bones in terms of memory:

VLADIMIR: Perhaps he has another bone for you?

ESTRAGON: Bone?

VLADIMIR: Chicken. Do you not remember?

ESTRAGON: It was him?³⁰

Ultimately the bones are a memory—absences become presences—projected onto visible objects in order to remedy the anxiety of remembrance.

Perhaps the most prop-heavy scene in the play is the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky. The objects accumulate at a rapid pace: "Lucky carries a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a greatcoat, Pozzo a whip."³¹ In his pocket, Pozzo carries a vaporizer, a pipe, and a watch. Of these, the watch seems to be the most obvious symbol, but like the tree, becomes multivalent. When Pozzo loses his watch, Vladimir suggests, "Perhaps it's

in your fob,"³² and the pair proceed to listen to Pozzo's stomach. Instead of the "tick-tick" of the watch, Estragon hears the beating of Pozzo's heart. Suddenly the watch as a symbol of time has been transformed simultaneously into a symbol of a heart, and thus reminds us of the ticking away of life.

Near the end of the play, Vladimir pontificates: "Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? To-morrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of to-day? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? . . . He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot."³³ In this way, a carrot—a seemingly straightforward symbol of biological sustenance—is transformed by Beckett into a symbol of the absurdity of the minutia of everyday life. At the end of the day, all he will remember is that he waited for Godot, and gave his friend a carrot. Beckett, through strategies underpinned by a dance of absence of presence, has turned a vegetable into a profound metaphorical statement about the human condition.

Endgame

In the play *Endgame*, like *Waiting for Godot*, a singular, minimalist setting is employed to set up the conditions of the play as a metaphor for the human condition. The opening stage directions read, "Bare interior. Gray light. Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn. Front right, a door. Hanging near the door, its face to the wall, a picture."³⁴ Among the objects that are on stage at the beginning of the play are Hamm's armchair on castors, the ashbins that house Nagg and Nell, a ladder, as well as sheets that cover the armchair and ashbins. In Hamm's possession are a whistle, a handkerchief, and a rug. Clov exclaims at the beginning of the play: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. (*Pause.*) Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap."³⁵ Clov might be referring to the objects that clutter the simple set. With typical, multivalent symbolism, Clov is also referring to the accumulation of time and the accumulation of memories. At the end of the game, all that is left is a heap (a body) on the floor. Absent memories become present objects, then are annihilated as those presences become absences once again.

Knowlson discusses a very interesting case in which Beckett's personal relationships can be directly traced to the characters in his play: "*Endgame* is not, of course, autobiographical drama. Yet it followed hard on the heels of Beckett's experience of the sickroom and of waiting for someone to die."³⁶ Knowlson notes that Lady Beatrice Glenavy, a friend of



Beckett's family, wrote about the similarities between the endgame of Hamm and the death of Beckett's aunt Cissie Sinclair. In her personal memoir, Glenavy writes: "When I read *Endgame* I recognized Cissie in Hamm. The play was full of allusions to things in her life, even the old telescope which Tom Casement had given me and I had passed on to her."³⁷ Here is some very good evidence, from a close friend of Beckett's family, that the playwright is projecting his own memories onto the visual objects that inhabit his plays. In this case, the telescope that Clov uses to gaze out the window at the grey world may represent Beckett's own memory of the death of his aunt.

There are even more examples of memory projected onto object representations in this play. Nagg and Nell occupy two ashbins, metaphors for the accumulation of the past: people as trash that are to be discarded once they have been used up. Nagg and Nell, perhaps Hamm's progenitors, discuss a shared memory involving a bicycle:

NAGG: Do you remember—

NELL: No.

NAGG: When we crashed our tandem and lost our shanks.

(They laugh heartily.)

NELL: It was in the Ardennes.

(They laugh heartily.)

NAGG: On the road to Sedan.³⁸

Here a trigger, the utterance about the bicycle, helps the pair retrieve a memory of their past together. The bicycle is also referred to by Hamm, who wishes that he had "a proper wheel-chair. With big wheels. Bicycle wheels!"³⁹

A similar play with an objective representation of memory happens when Nagg retells Nell the story of the trousers. The story itself is seemingly trivial: a tale about an Englishman man who brings his striped trousers to his tailor for alterations, and has trouble getting them back. The point of the story is not the tale of the trousers, it is the remembrance of the event that the invisible object of memory retrieves: the time when Nagg first told the story about the trousers to Nell. As Nagg tells the story, Nell recounts the day of their engagement: "It was on Lake Como. *(Pause.)* One April afternoon."⁴⁰ Nagg finishes the story and Nell replies, "You could see down to the bottom."⁴¹

Sometimes the objects infused into Beckett's plays are even harder to deduce. For example, the windows at the back of the room are

simultaneously symbols of a possible escape as well as a symbol of being trapped. Likewise, Hamm's armchair, set on castors, is a symbol of immobility as well as a symbol of his confinement. Another object-representation in this play is the toy dog with three legs. The dog is a symbol of interdependence, "Leave him like that, standing there imploring me."⁴² By the end of the play, Hamm asks for the dog again, this time to comfort his loneliness, then discards the dog, as he believes Clov has discarded him. Through the careful selection of objects of memory—physicalised into a present, embodied form that surround the characters and trigger their remembrances—Beckett has set into motion a tapestry of objects that come to represent all of the hope and futility of the human condition.

As Clov prepares to leave, he takes down the picture with its face turned to the wall and replaces it with an alarm clock. The picture, perhaps itself an attack on a linking associated with the painful memory of an absent father, has been turned towards the wall. One object takes the place of the other. The placement of the alarm clock is how Clov plans to tell Hamm he has gone. The clock is at once a symbol of time as well as a symbol of life. In the end, Clov does not leave. "He halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, till the end."⁴³ As the title of the play suggests, the play winds down to an ending, but this time the ending is more final than in *Godot*. Hamm reflects: "Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of (*he hesitates*) . . . that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life."⁴⁴ Here, the grain, like the sand from the beach that fills the ashbins of Nell and Nagg, symbolises the stifling effects of the passage of time, and the accumulation of memories. Almost simultaneously, absences become presences, and presences become absences.

Krapp's Last Tape

There is, perhaps, no play in which the physical manifestations of memory are as clear as in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. As in *Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*, Beckett's preoccupation with memory manifests in a number of ways: in the circumstances of the play, in the way that props are employed as objects of memory, and in the prevailing themes of existence and death that pervade his work. What makes *Krapp* stand apart from the other plays is the way that the technology of the reel-to-reel is implemented in the dramatic structure of the play. There is a literal give and take between a living human being and a recorded version thereof. The live Krapp competes with the mediatized Krapp for primacy, and in the end the



inanimate object wins out. Although the play was written at the time of the mere dawning of the computer age, it is hard not to credit Beckett for his prescience, forecasting the existential dilemma of the digital self.

The anxiety of remembrance takes hold from the very beginning of the play, within the intricate stage directions that precede the action. At the centre of the stage there is “a small table, the two drawers of which open towards audience.”⁴⁵ The technological conceits required by the play are also set up from the onset, establishing that the single actor will need “a tape-recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes.”⁴⁶ The decrepit nature of the protagonist is also established. He is hard of hearing and near of sight. He suffers from constipation, for which he obsessively consumes bananas. He is an alcoholic, evidenced by the number of times he staggers off stage to elicit the pop of a cork in the wings. The presence of an aging, infirm central character is not surprising to find in a Beckett play. What is surprising, however, is that the weathered body of the old man is more than just a metaphor for human existence. It is also a symbol of fading memory.

As with the proliferation of properties in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*, there is a similar strategy deployed in *Krapp's Last Tape*. Besides the tape spindles, which are the most obvious symbols of the physical manifestation of memory, the lead character constantly fumbles for objects in his pockets. This mirrors the objects kept in Pozzo's coat pockets in *Godot* and Winnie's bag in *Happy Days*. Among the objects are a “heavy silver watch and chain.”⁴⁷ The multivalent symbol of the clock appears again in one of Beckett's plays, a placeholder for the ticking away of time and the encroachment of death. Krapp fumbles in his pockets, taking out an envelope and then keys. He unlocks the drawer and takes out a spool of tape and a banana, and then eats the banana. He then fumbles in his pocket again for his keys, unlocks the second drawer, pulls out a second banana, peels it, and puts it in his mouth but does not eat it, instead putting it in his pocket. He comes back carrying a ledger, another example of an absent memory made present, an invisible-made-visible object in which he keeps the codes and keys to the reels of recorded memory.

The text of the play is riddled with instances in which the old man tries to decipher the meaning of his own voice on the tape. When he encounters something that he does not remember, he stops the tape, continually referring to the written ledger in an attempt to jog his memory: “Memorable equinox? . . . (Pause. He shrugs his shoulders, peers again at the ledger, reads.) Farewell to—(he turns to the page)—love.”⁴⁸ Krapp tries to remember what he meant by the term “grain”: “The grain, now what I wonder do I mean by that, I mean . . . (hesitates) . . . I suppose I mean

those things worth having when all the dust has—when all *my* dust has settled.”⁴⁹ Like the dust that covers and traps Winnie in *Happy Days*, the grain he is referring to is dust, but not just any dust. It is the dust of his life, perhaps the dust of his own cremation, the ultimate absencing of his own physical presence. Krapp thinks about Old Miss McGlome, who sang songs of her girlhood, and regrets the fact that he never sang. He thinks about his ex-girlfriend Bianca, who he lived with on Kedar Street. He remembers when his was laying in bed, dying “after her long viduity.”⁵⁰ Forgetting the meaning of the word, he gets out a dictionary and looks up “viduity,” which is a prolonged period of widowhood. The tape is a literally a record of memories within memories.

Another vivid remembrance that is triggered by an object of memory is the occasion of his mother’s death. Krapp remembers that, at the moment she passed, he was playing fetch with a small dog. He laments, “All over and done with, at last. I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. (*Pause.*) Moments. Her moments, my moments. (*Pause.*) I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day. (*Pause.*) I might have kept it. (*Pause.*) But I gave it to the dog.”⁵¹ In this case, the ball is not a physical presence on stage, but is in itself the presence of a memory that acts as a trigger for further remembering, and then forgetting. The memory of his mother’s death is linked with the memory of a more physical object—the memory of the ball—but then an attack on linking, a forgetting, results in the removal of the pain associated with the original memory. In the end, instead of fixating on his mother’s death, he obsesses about the object within which the event is subsumed, the memory of the black rubber ball. Jon Erikson claims that “Postmodernism is in fact the reverse of Krapp’s method: it is a continual act of forgetting that can’t help but remember.”⁵² If this is true, then the crux of this play is embodied in a continual act of remembering that can’t help but forgetting.

Another aspect of the play that typifies Beckett’s dramaturgy is the way that it defies a sense of linear narrative. In the case of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Beckett utilises the technological object of the tape to elicit a circular structure, using Krapp’s favourite memory to create a kind of centrifugal force that the play orbits around. At the epicentre is the memory of a day spent with a girl picking gooseberries and laying in the sun on a boat on a lake. As Krapp fast-forwards and rewinds the tape, he searches for the day that signifies the high point of his life. Because he first ends up too far into the section, and then rewinds too far back, the audience does not hear the unclipped version of the memory until the end of the play. It is a memory of a day spent with a girl picking gooseberries and laying in the sun on a boat



on a lake:

I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side. *Pause. Krapp's lips move. No sound.* Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited."⁵³

In this moment, the memory is fully restored, and the living Krapp gives way to the mediated version of himself. As he stares motionless into the void, the tape runs into silence, and the play ends.

Happy Days

There is a particular type of presence that makes *Happy Days* stand apart from Beckett's other plays. In the case of *Happy Days*, it is the presence of memory that is the central symbol of the play. Perhaps the most crucial objective representation of memory is the bag in which Winnie keeps all of her worldly possessions. At first glance, it might seem like a symbol of materialism. However, on closer inspection, it is a bag full of memories. When Beckett directed *Happy Days* for the first time in the 1971 Berlin production, among the changes he made was one that "stressed the 'agedness' and 'endingness' of the objects that Winnie takes out of her bag."⁵⁴ Winnie states: "There is of course the bag. (*Turns towards it.*) There will always be the bag."⁵⁵ So, if the time should come when "words fail" and Willie were to leave her, she is comforted by the fact that she will always have her memories.

As usual in Beckett's writing, there is also an absencing of presence. Winnie says:

I used to think—I say I used to think—that all these things—put back into the bag—if too soon—put back too soon—could be taken out again—if necessary—if needed—and so on—indefinitely—back into the bag—back out of the bag—until the bell—went. (*Stops tidying, head up, smile.*) But no.⁵⁶

Winnie takes things out of her bag, examines them, and then returns them to the bag in the same way that a person might pull a memory out of their mind to think about, and then stow away to cherish at a later date.

As life goes on, our memories fade. Thus, Winnie realises that eventually she will not be able to take things in and out of the bag. Winnie constantly remembers the past and then immediately forgets it, another example of the presencing of absence and an absencing of presence. In

one of Winnie's memories, she remembers her hair: "Golden you called it, that day, when the last guest was gone—(*hand up in gesture of raising a glass*)—to your golden . . . may it never . . . (*Hand down. Head down. Pause. Low.*) That day. (*Pause. Do.*) What day? (*Pause. Head up. Normal voice.*) What now?"⁵⁷ As soon as the memory comes into consciousness, it is lost and then obliterated.

In the correspondence between Beckett and Schneider regarding the character of Winnie, there is clearly a concentration on the presence embodied by the actress that was chosen to play Winnie, Ruth White. Beckett wrote to Schneider: "Hope your girl has desirable fleshiness. Audience throughout Act II should miss this gleaming opulent flesh—gone."⁵⁸ Clearly, one can see this emphasis on the flesh of the body echoed in Winnie's lines in the play when she says: "And if for some strange reason no further pains are possible, why then just close the eyes—(*she does so*)—and wait for the day to come—(*opens eyes*)—the happy day to come when flesh melts at so many degrees and the night of the moon has so many hundred hours."⁵⁹

Beckett gives Winnie an unmistakable presence: she is immobile, buried, in a mound of dirt. The dramatic action of Beckett's play depends on the absencing of her presence, the obliteration of the object-representation. In this way, the mound in which Winnie is embedded might be interpreted as an accumulation of the presence of memory. Later, ironically, this same accumulation overtakes her countenance and removes all traces of her embodiment—the accumulation of memory absences the presence of her body. Beckett writes to Schneider about the contrasts between the two acts of the play: "All this leaning and turning and motion of arms and bust in Act I should be as ample and graceful (memorable) as possible, in order that its absence in Act II may have maximum effect."⁶⁰ Winnie's lines give even more weight to this absencing of the presence of the body when she says: "Shall I myself not melt perhaps in the end."⁶¹

Beckett seems to support the argument that *Happy Days* is about the obliteration of memory in his own explanation of the play. He explains: "Something begins; something else begins. She begins but doesn't carry through with it. She's constantly being interrupted or interrupting herself. She's an interrupted being."⁶² This constant interruption of memory is eventually what leads Winnie to have a happy day. It is only once she has forgotten that it can truly be a "happy day." It is the eventual accumulation of these memories, the ultimate stifling and immobilising effect of their presence, that Winnie experiences. Eventually, the memories overcome her, and her human presence is overcome by the arresting forces of memory.



The Dramaturgy of Memory

The study of Beckett's plays vis-à-vis Bion's theories need not stop here. Beyond these four plays, an analysis of Beckett's plays through a psychoanalytic lens may be an active archaeological site that can be excavated for years to come. In *Not I*, this paradigm illuminates the importance of the Auditor in relationship to the Mouth. Perhaps the pair represents the conscious and the unconscious. In *Play*, the three urns can be seen as the projection of the memories of the dead onto visual objects. Cognitive methods might be used to analyse plays like *Act Without Words I*. This play may present the very moment of self-consciousness, the transition from reflex ("he reflects") to self-awareness, with the final stage direction: "He looks at his hands."⁶³ Even the impenetrable *Act Without Words II* might be translated into yeoman's terms by utilising this paradigm. Perhaps it is an encoding of Beckett's own theory of the evolution of consciousness. "A is slow, awkward"⁶⁴—a pre-historic objective self as body—crawling, eating carrots, and popping pills. Then there is the self-conscious "B brisk, rapid, precise,"⁶⁵ on wheels, with tools (or objective representations of memory): the watch, the toothbrush, and comb. Finally, C might be the very spark of life itself, the phallic goad (gonad) penetrating a sack (oviduct), with the energy that re-circulates the wheel of existence. Of course, these ideas only represent a sliver of the many possible interpretations of these plays. In fact, that is precisely the point. It is Beckett's unique strategy that makes these multiple interpretations possible.

Finally, not to discount the fact that Beckett's plays have already had an enormous impact on the writing of generations of playwrights, perhaps a better understanding of dramaturgical methods inspired by Beckett's use of projective identification and attacks on linking will provoke generations of future playwrights yet to come. Despite the probability that Beckett's dramaturgical strategies were derived from his own particular pathology and obsessions with memory, a hopeful outcome of this analysis is to suggest that others may be able to co-opt this same approach for maximum effect in their own plays.

In the early 1950s, Beckett's plays took the theatre world by storm. Until that time, no one had ever experienced a play quite like *Waiting for Godot*. The plotline of *Godot* exploded the classical dramatic model with a story about two friends who wait for a man who never arrives. Beckett's rise to fame continued with *Endgame*, a chilling meditation on life and death. His career continued with the touching *Krapp's Last Tape*, a one-man-show fusing technology with a story of human longing. Even the nearly

impenetrable *Happy Days*, Beckett's attempt to write a "happy play" after the heartbreaking story of Krapp left its mark on playwriting history.⁶⁶ Long after the production of these plays that forever changed the landscape of modern drama, there have been very few playwrights who have approached Beckett's level of achievement. Perhaps by coming to a better understanding of Beckett's approach to playwriting as the manifestation and obliteration of the presence of memory on the stage, future playwrights might begin to approach the achievements of Beckett's unattainable genius.

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NOTES

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- ² Connor, Steven, "Beckett and Bion," *Beckett and London Conference*, (1998), <http://www.stevenconnor.com/beckbion/>, Accessed Online 16 April 2015.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 775.
- ⁴ See Bennett Simon, "The Imaginary Twins: The Case of Beckett and Bion," *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 15 (1988):331–52.
- ⁵ Oppenheim, "A Preoccupation", 768.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 770.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 781.
- ⁸ Wilfred Bion, "Attacks on Linking," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 82 no.2 (2013): 285. [Originally published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 40 (1959):308-315].
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 289.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 290.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 293.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 296.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 297.
- ¹⁵ Stanton B. Garner, "'Still Living Flesh': Beckett, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenological Body," *Theatre Journal* 45 n.4 (1993): 444.

- ¹⁶ Yuan Yuan, "Representation and Absence: Paradoxical Structure in Postmodern Texts," *Symposium* 51 no.2 (1997): 129.
- ¹⁷ Paul Lawley, "Counterpoint, Absence and the Medium in Beckett's *Not I*," *Modern Drama* 26 (1983): 412.
- ¹⁸ Victoria Stephens, "Nothingness, No-thing, and Nothing in the Work of Wilfred Bion and in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*," *Psychoanalytic Review* 92 no.4 (2005): 619.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 632.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 633-634.
- ²¹ Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider, *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, ed. Maurice Harmon, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 92.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 94.
- ²³ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 6.
- ²⁴ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 376.
- ²⁵ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 10.
- ²⁶ Beckett and Schneider, *No Author Better Served*, 278.
- ²⁷ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 37.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 31.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ³⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame and Act Without Words* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 1.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ³⁶ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 366.
- ³⁷ Glenavy qtd. in *Ibid.*, 367.
- ³⁸ Beckett, *Endgame*, 16.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ⁴⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces* (New York: Grove

Press, 1957), 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 15, emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁵¹ Ibid., 19-20.

⁵² Erikson, *The Fate of the Object*, 86.

⁵³ Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 27-28.

⁵⁴ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 517.

⁵⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 27.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁸ Beckett and Schneider, *No Author Better Served*, 94.

⁵⁹ Beckett, *Happy Days*, 18.

⁶⁰ Beckett and Schneider, *No Author Better Served*, 94.

⁶¹ Beckett, *Happy Days*, 38.

⁶² Beckett qtd. in James Knowlson, *Happy Days: Samuel Beckett's Production Notebook* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 16.

⁶³ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986), 206.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 209.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 209.

⁶⁶ See Christopher Murray, "Beckett's Productions in Ireland," *Irish University Review* 14 no.1 (1984): 111.