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## Beckett and the theatrical sign: the need for semiotics

Martin Revermann

To have conceptualized theatre as a communicative system is the lasting merit of the theatre theoreticians commonly subsumed under the label “Prague Linguistic Circle” (PLC). At the core of this kind of conceptualization lies its smallest analytical unit, the theatrical sign. Regardless of the precise definition of the theatrical sign, i.e. whether a dualist Saussurean definition (sign-signifier) or a Peircean triadic one (sign-object-referent) is being adopted, the semiotic model has the notion of exchange written into its innermost fabric: signs need to be both generated and received. This seemingly simple yet in fact very powerful insight amounted to nothing less than a paradigm-change in the history of theatre theory, as it effectively replaced the at the time still dominant, and ultimately Aristotelian, emphasis on text, word, script and the production of theatre with a novel focus on performance, body, acting and the complex dynamics of reception within the theatrical event. Drama is now rigorously being conceptualized as theatre, characters becomes actors, texts become scripts, and theories need to move beyond the page towards the stage. Honzl describes this conceptual shift as follows:

If we do not wish to find ourselves caught up in *meaningless theoretical schemes* [my emphasis] and if we do not wish to use words stripped of reality by abstract deductions, we must link Aristotle with the Greek dramatists in order to grasp the real meaning of what they considered “action, not [mere] narration”. (HONZL 2016b [1943]: 164)

There is a certain irony here in that despite Honzl’s pronounced statement Greek theatre is, in fact, living nothing but a shadow existence in the actual writings of the PLC. Yet, the reference to the Greeks and their most pre-eminent theoretician is arguably symbolic more than anything, since the tradition of theatre theory which Honzl is militating against here was so pre-occupied with the Greek tradition, and in some ways weighed down by it. Honzl’s insistence that theory is nothing without being linked to

practice – a conviction which lies at the very centre of the PLC – was therefore particularly needed in the field of theatre and would prove to be especially liberating here.

This shift of focus comes with a concomitant fundamental shift in the mode of analysis away from a combination of the descriptive and prescriptive mode (“how has theatre created meaning?” and “how should theatre create meaning?”, respectively), which had been influentially engrained by the Aristotelian *Poetics*. Instead, there is a move towards what may best be branded the analytical mode (“how does theatre mean?”). The analytical nature of theatre semiotics brings with it an openness and neutrality which is unusually empowering in that any theatre (past, present and future) of any cultural pedigree can fruitfully be approached from a semiotic vantage point. In addition, PLC-inspired theatre semiotics can function as a meta-approach, an “umbrella theory” so to speak, under which other approaches can easily be subsumed (including cultural materialism, gender, deconstruction and, of course, Aristotelian formalism). Extensions to other media (film, digital media and so forth) are also easily possible.

The innovative nature of theatre semiotics, as initiated by the PLC and subsequently pursued by many others, is characterized by two aspects in particular. There is, for one thing, the in-built emphasis on the intricate dynamics of the reception of theatre by a group of onlookers. Theatre semiotics, in other words, makes it impossible to ignore the audience and “theorize it out of the equation” in any way (which can, and does, happen much more easily within an Aristotelian framework). Secondly, theatre semiotics fully acknowledges the multiplicity of communication channels in theatre (body, space, movement, colour, language, smell, sound and so forth), all of which co-exist on an egalitarian basis (while one communication channel may temporarily be “foregrounded” and thereby become “dominant”). This is important, because it means language is only one of those many channels, and in no way an intrinsically privileged one (as any theory which, like the Aristotelian one, prefers text over performance would have it). This move is equivalent to dethroning language as the primary communication channel in the theatre, hence the prime focus of analysis. Instead, theatre semiotics brings with it the notion that each communication channel is, in principle, equally important and therefore worthy of the same amount of analytical attention.

The emergence of semiotic thinking about the collaborative art form theatre in the late 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, then, amounted to a full-blown paradigm shift in the theory of theatre by fully and rigorously connecting theory with the stage and by moving beyond the categories of Aristotelian analysis (especially those of plot, character and diction). Why this revolution – the term is not an over-statement in this context – occurred around 1930 and not much earlier is a difficult question to answer conclusively. It is tempting to connect the emergence of early theatre semiotics with that of theatre forms created by the historical avant-garde (futurism, Dadaism, surrealism and emerging epic theatre in particular), not least because some thinkers associated with the PLC were themselves avant-garde theatre practitioners as well (DRÁBEK 2016: 548–551, 572–581). In fact, this paper will make the point that for understanding a theatre artist like Beckett, Aristotelian theory is put under such duress that a paradigm-change along the lines of PLC-inspired semiotics is indeed necessary (while elements of Aristotelian

theory may still continue to be helpful). When looking at the issue from a historical perspective, however, there is the cautionary tale of as central a figure as Otakar Zich whose theatrical influences in fact appear to have been quite conservative rather than avant-garde (DRÁBEK 2016: 616–620). The strong interest of Bogatyrev and others in folklore and puppet theatre, i.e. traditional forms of popular theatre, also militates against this view (even if Bogatyrev saw many parallels between those traditional forms and the avant-garde). Historically speaking, then, not every theorist needed avant-garde art to realize that conventional theoretical approaches had to be re-thought, even if avant-garde theatre very much lent itself to those novel approaches.

Another attempt at an explanation may therefore be to look at the question the other way round and ask why the Aristotelian model proved to be so entrenched, so resilient and so hard to abandon. The perhaps almost oppressive power of the classical Greek tradition and the cultural prestige associated with the name of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristotle must surely be a factor. One may also note the absence of other sustained theories of theatre from Graeco-Roman antiquity to rival the Aristotelian *Poetics*. Other sustained theoretical discussions of the theatre, at least some of which might in fact have been more performance-oriented and therefore have pre-figured some of the thinking of the PLC, have simply not come down to us. We know, for instance that Sophocles authored a treatise with the intriguing title *On the Chorus*, which is lost. Of Cratinus' *Wine-Flask* (*Pytinê*), a highly meta-theatrical comedy performed in Athens in 423 BCE which must have contained all kinds of reflections on theatre production and performance in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, only meagre fragments survive (BAKOLA 2010: 59–63). In addition, the near-exclusive interest of Aristotle's *Poetics* – or rather of the truncated version of Aristotle's *Poetics* which has come down to us – in tragedy (and epic poetry) and not comedy or satyr play, for that matter, also inevitably narrowed the focus of analysis (as subsequently becomes particularly clear in French neo-classical drama and the *querelle des anciens et modernes*, or the role of Greek tragedy in German Idealism of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century). Lastly, there is the increasing literarization of theatre since the early modern age which culminated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. When playwrights were writing not just with a view to the stage but increasingly also to the printed page (in the hope for visibility despite various modes of censorship as well as monetary profit from growing book markets and wide international readerships), it is easy to see why a more formalistic and compositional theoretical approach like that of the Aristotelian *Poetics* should end up being perceived as the most suitable one.

In an intellectual environment so much dominated by the Aristotelian framework, more performative thinking occurred not systematically but more haphazardly when actors and acting, instead of playwrights and scripts, happened to be the prime focus of analysis. Thus Lucian's intriguing treatise *On Pantomime* (i.e. solo dance by a masked performer who is being accompanied by music and a chorus) from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, parts of Zeami's writings on acting in Japanese *Noh* theatre from the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century or Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* from the 1770s could, at least to a certain extent, be considered semiotic approaches *avant la lettre*. They nonetheless remain exceptions against the background of pervasive (neo-)Aristotelianism.

## The challenge of Beckett: putting conventional theatre theory under duress

Moving away from historical considerations to more strictly theoretical ones, paradigm changes of a dominant explanatory model are needed, in any branch of inquiry or academic discipline, when new evidence can no longer be explained satisfactorily by the currently standard model, which in turn leads to the complete extinction of the previous model or to various modes of its integration into the new, broader and more successful paradigm with its greater explanatory power. This historical and methodological insight into the dynamics of paradigms under duress was developed for the sciences (in particular physics and astronomy) by Thomas S. Kuhn in his vastly influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (first published in 1962). But it can quite easily and legitimately be transferred to cultural studies, including the history of theatre theory. Here the theatrical works of Samuel Beckett become an excellent field for exploration, because they push the Aristotelian model into areas where its explanatory power is often very limited or even non-existent.<sup>1</sup> As a formalistic, production-driven approach informed by a holistic conception of the “well-made play” (with a beginning, a middle and an end) and centred on notions of coherent plot and character, stable and well-defined chronotopes, intelligible script and language and a compositional arc containing reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnôrisis*), the Aristotelian model is very much put under duress when confronted with Beckett’s handling of the theatre. Some particularly challenging areas for the Aristotelian model when grappling with Beckett are the following:

**1. Structure.** The compressed form of all of Beckett’s dramatic works, even those that are comparatively long like *Krapp’s Last Tape*, *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*, poses its own challenges. Some of these are of major consequence not from a theoretical but a more practical point of view. The sheer brevity of most pieces, for instance, makes them no longer suitable to conventional forms of commodification within the established frameworks for the consumption of theatre entertainment. They are, quite simply, too short to fill a full “theatre evening,” or even half of one (at least as conventionally practiced). Beckett, keenly aware of the miniature formats, even gave *Come and Go* the ironic generic label “dramaticule,” which is both a diminutive (“little drama”) and a pun (alluding to the word “ridiculous” and its cognates) at the same time.

More important for the theoretician, however, is the fact that dramatic works by Beckett may lack any sense of beginning-middle-end, concepts which are so central to the Aristotelian conceptualization of drama. Pieces like *Play* or *Not I* delineate in loops, cycles or streams which come out of nowhere and go into nowhere, with the curtain functioning as an arbitrary and artificial cut-off device which super-imposes closure externally. This is a point where an Aristotelian approach starts to lack analytical grip on the object of study.

<sup>1</sup> Because they would require additional methodological discussion I will leave out Beckett’s radio plays in the present context.

**2. Limiting or expanding sign systems.** Beckett is keen to limit select sign systems or use them in ways that are unusual or possibly even unnatural. Movement is an obvious and popular one: Winnie of *Happy Days* who is entombed, literally, in a mound of sand is a particularly striking one, with the mound even rising in height between Act I and Act II. The notion of entombment is also literalized in the form of the urns which the three characters of *Play* are confined to. Of the four characters in *Endgame* none is able to move freely in the way a healthy human being normally can (Clov, who can walk, is unable to sit down). Language too is a sign system the scope of which Beckett likes to reduce, especially by rendering it unintelligible. The voice of Mouth in *Not I* is, as per the initial stage direction, to be unintelligible while the curtain is still down. But once the curtain is up, intelligibility continues to be an issue. This is because the narrative, relentlessly punctuated as it is throughout by triple dots after a few words or even one syllable, is very hard to follow for the spectator (and, one may conclude, for the Auditor [“sex undeterminable”] who is established as an internal audience in the initial stage direction). Intelligibility becomes even more of a problem once this staccato-like delivery, which is scripted by Beckett’s punctuation (an internal stage direction, effectively), is performed at a steadily fast pace, as is the norm in productions of this piece. The fast pace is not part of Beckett’s otherwise characteristically detailed stage directions, by contrast with *Play*, where in the first stage direction Beckett asks for “rapid tempo throughout,” which results in a similar effect of, at best, only partial intelligibility. In *Not I*, the accelerated delivery with its effect on intelligibility appears to be scripted in the primary text: it feels as though words written like this demand a high speed of delivery by default. By dealing with sign systems in this way Beckett does not diminish their importance but in fact increases it by problematizing them: can language function as a communicative tool at all? do human beings have freedom of movement to begin with?

The challenge posed by this to the Aristotelian model is the fact that the diversity of sign systems which are operative during the theatrical event in such instances is not, or not properly, on its radar screen. Phenomena like movement, gesture, pace, pitch, paralinguistic signs - items which PLC-style semiotics is able to grasp with concepts like “stage figure” or, quite simply, alert analysis of the complexity involved in theatrical communication - are not properly built into the Aristotelian field of vision. Hence the approach is in constant danger of missing out on aspects which are central to the theatrical experience envisioned by a theatre artist like Beckett.

**3. Handling of plot and character.** As the two most important parts in the hierarchy of elements which make up tragedy (*tragôidia*), the chief item of interest in the Aristotelian *Poetics*, plot (*mythos*) and character (*êthos*) are central to Aristotelian analysis, not least two of its most salient features, namely recognition (*anagnôrisis*) and reversal (*peripeteia*). Minimal plots (*Waiting for Godot*), incoherent ones (*Not I*), cyclical ones (*Play*) or altogether lacking ones (*Breath*) are standard fare in Beckett’s theatre, as are characters who are (i) minimally determined and un- or under-localized, or (ii) elaborately determined in one isolated area (e.g. pacing in *Footfalls* or the costume of Flo,

Vi and Ru in *Come and Go*) but undeterminable in others (age, for instance), or (iii) elaborately determined in areas which traditional concepts of dramatic character see as secondary or tertiary, e.g. the categories light, eyes, voice, costume, attitude, chair, and rock (!) of the “prematurely old” W in *Rockaby*. Again, the major challenge for an Aristotelian analysis is that its toolbox is too small, too hierarchical and too undifferentiated for handling properly this kind of complexity in these kinds of areas of theatrical communication. This, on the other hand, is what the semiotic approach with its egalitarian analysis of sign systems in action is much better equipped to do, by applying, for instance, the notion of extreme over-coding (e.g. too much information provided in the rapid deliveries of *Play*) which Beckett often juxtaposes with extreme under-coding (e.g. Mouth in *Not I*, a single body part used as a *pars pro toto*, that is a synecdochic stand-in for a full actor, character and stage figure). Semiotics too is in a much better position to describe, and thereby help to understand, the extreme actorial challenges that this type of theatre poses for practitioners.

**4. Language, esp. speech.** These may be greatly diminished in their communicative function or lose it altogether (cf. the remarks on unintelligibility under 1 above). There may be no speech at all, as in *Breath* or in the mimes (Beckett’s denotation) *Act Without Words I* and *II*, although the first two of these pieces prominently deploy paralinguistic signs (cry and whistle; see also Schmid’s contribution in this volume). That said, it is telling that many Beckett plays also occupy the other end of the extreme in the sense that they are linguistically migrant texts which wander, as the author’s originals, between a small set of language communities: *Waiting for Godot*, *Rough for Theatre I* and *II*, *Play*, *Come and Go* as well as *Catastrophe* are all pieces that were originally written in English or French and were then quickly produced, as authorial versions translated by Beckett himself, in French, English or German (before being translated by others into many other languages as part of global dramatic literature).<sup>2</sup> Linguistic and cultural shifts are not part of an Aristotelian approach at all, since in the intellectual climate of 4<sup>th</sup>-century BCE Greece drama was conceived in and for a monocultural continuum with Athens as its cultural epicentre (interestingly so, despite great regionalism in politics and high mobility of theatre practitioners).

**5. Performativity.** Most Beckett scripts are barely intelligible without performative embodiment. That this need for performative instantiation exists by authorial design is evident from the quantity and density of secondary text (i.e. stage directions and any other paratext) in Beckett’s dramatic scripts, some of which consist of secondary text entirely (*Breath*, *Act Without Words I* and *II*). Just how unimportant performance, conceptualized by Aristotle as “spectacle” (*opsis*), is in the *Poetics* continues to be a matter of debate (HALLIWELL 1998: 337–343). But there is no denying that while *opsis* is one of the six parts of tragedy distinguished by Aristotle, it is the lowest in his hierarchy for being “the least essential to the art of poetry” (*Poetics* 6, 1450b17f.). In conjunction with

2 On Beckett as a self-translator see (SCHEINER 2013).



Aristotle's claim that tragedy can have its full impact when (only) being read (*Poetics* 26, 1462a11–13), this makes an Aristotelian approach not particularly well-equipped to analyse performativity in any shape or form.

**6. Chronotopes.** Beckett enjoys experimenting with unusual time-space relations. Thus *Krapp's Last Tape* takes place vaguely, and somewhat weirdly, during “A late evening in the future.” Yet this strange temporal indeterminacy co-exists with extreme attention to spatial details in the opening stage direction, complete with meticulous prescriptions for how Krapp is to move within this space before he speaks his first words (and thereafter). *Play* is set in one of the most static and compressed spaces one could possibly imagine (three urns on a stage!). This extreme spatial compression is juxtaposed with time (as structured by speech) that is delineating at an extremely fast pace (“rapid tempo throughout”). While time and space are on the Aristotelian agenda (most definitely in its extreme interpretation as the French neo-classical dogma of the “three unities” of time, space and action), the approach is, once again, too bland and too undifferentiated to deal effectively with explorations of chronotopes in Beckett.

I hasten to add that the point of listing these “problem areas” is not at all to discredit wholesale the Aristotelian approach, but to indicate fields of resistance and phenomena where it starts to lack analytical fire power – which in turn tend to be areas where theatre semiotics is particularly strong. Nor are these challenges equally great, and things of course also vary on a case-by-case basis. But the pressure on the traditional mode of theoretical analysis is definitely there. Beckett himself was keenly aware of this, and the generic labels he uses for some of his creations seem to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek pointers. With the “tragi-comedy” *Waiting for Godot*, the “mimes” *Act without Words I* and *II*, and with a play entitled *Ohio Impromptu* the implicit challenge is: “Analyse *this!*”

## Semiotics in action: *Ohio Impromptu*

This final piece just mentioned, *Ohio Impromptu*, one of Beckett's last pieces for the theatre from 1981, is a particularly illuminating object of analysis in the present context.<sup>3</sup> This is, on the one hand, because the play at its most fundamental level is the most basic or “skeletal” form of theatre itself, consisting of the following: two actorial bodies which are impersonating dramatic characters (Reader and Listener), a script (materialized on stage as the book), an actorial voice (Reader), an audience (Listener) as well as props (hat, table, chair) and costume (hair). There is even such a thing as a rudimentary coherent plot with a beginning and an end: the narrative arch progresses from “Little is left to tell” (the play's opening line) to “Nothing is left to tell” (its closing line). In this sense, *Ohio Impromptu* can be considered Beckett's most classically constructed

<sup>3</sup> *Ohio Impromptu* has, perhaps surprisingly, attracted comparatively little scholarly attention. For some discussion see (O'GORMAN 1988; KNOWLSON 1996: 584–586; KUNDERT-GIBBS 1999; SLOTE 2013: 156f.).



play, perhaps together with *Krapp's Last Tape* with which it has other similarities (especially the notion of replicating an individual on stage, via a double and a tape recorder respectively).

Characteristically, Beckett combines this design of “skeletal theatre” in action with pushing the ontological limits of theatre when specifying in the initial stage direction that Reader and Listener are to be “as alike in appearance as possible.” Beckett thereby underlines that, for all its capabilities, the theatrical sign generated by the human body cannot be replicated exactly (by contrast with film, as is done by Anthony Minghella in his filmed version of *Ohio Impromptu* for the *Beckett on Film* project from 2002, featuring Jeremy Irons as Reader and Listener).<sup>4</sup> This important observation lies at the heart of what, decades later, surfaced as the debate about “liveness” and the ontological status of performance *vis-à-vis* mediatization, triggered by Philip Auslander’s provocative landmark study first published in 1999 (AUSLANDER 2008, 2012). Beckett’s challenge comes with a fascinating in-built twist: the more theatre attempts to achieve the ontologically impossible (i.e. exact replication of the theatrical sign), the more its failure to do so will become obvious. Directors may try to achieve the illusion of replication by using masks or part of the costume (big identical wigs for Reader and Listener, for instance), also exploiting the fact that there will always be some spatial distance between performers and audience. But theatre can never “succeed” in this respect, it can only “fail better.” The ultimate give-away here is the Listener, for there is a reason that the Listener *has* to be silent: the actor’s voice would give away the uniqueness of the human individual, since no two human voices can be exactly replicated by natural means.

Knocking, a non-verbal sign, therefore becomes Listener’s sole mode of communication. Its use in the play is striking, and knocking becomes the memorable signature sign of *Ohio Impromptu*. Superficially gestural in nature, the knocking is at the same time an aural, para-linguistic and also linguistic sign which, significantly, acquires its own peculiar semantics in the course of the play. To understand this properly it is necessary to take a closer look at the five instances of knocking (in sequence):

R: [Reading.] Little is left to tell. In a last –

[*L. knocks with left hand on table.*]

Little is left to tell.

[*Pause. Knock.*]

In a last attempt to obtain relief (...)

(...) Then turn and his slow steps retrace.

[*Pause.*]

In his dreams –

[*Knock.*]

Then turn and his slow steps retrace.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, in *Quad*, written around the same time (1982) for television, Beckett similarly requires the four “players” to be “as alike in build as possible.” So when writing for a medium in which exact replication would have been technologically possible in principle, Beckett insists on the theatre-aspects of this piece instead.

[Pause. Knock.]

In his dreams he had been warned against this change. Seen the dear face and heard the unspoken words, Stay where we were so long alone together, my shade will comfort you.

[Pause.]

Could he not –

[Knock.]

Seen the dear face and heard the unspoken words, Stay where we were so long alone together, my shade will comfort you.

[Pause. Knock.]

Could he not now turn back? (...)

—  
(...) Little is left to tell. One night –

[Knock.]

Little is left to tell.

[Pause. Knock.]

One night as he sat trembling head in hands from head to foot a man appeared to him (...)

—  
So the sad –

[Knock.]

Saw the dear face and heard the unspoken words, No need to go to him again, even were it in your power.

[Pause. Knock.]

So the sad tale a last time told they sat on as though turned to stone. (...)

—  
The sad tale a last time told.

[Pause.]

Nothing is left to tell.

[Pause. R makes to close book. Knock. R closes book.

Knock.

Silence. Five seconds.

Simultaneously they lower their right hands to table, raise their heads and look at each other. Unblinking. Expressionless.

Ten seconds.

Fade-out.] (BECKETT 1986: 443–448)

In passage (1) the meaning of the knocking, as defined by its situational context, is initially “stop” while the second knocking, very shortly thereafter, clearly means “go on,” i.e. the exact opposite. This is complicated in passage (2) where the first knocking again means “stop” but is interpreted by R as “repeat.” The second knocking in this passage is again “go on” but it too is interpreted by R as “repeat,” this time, however, picking up the second train of thought. The third knocking means “stop.” It is, once again, interpreted by R as “repeat,” but this time starting from yet another place, in the middle of the previous train of thought. The fourth and final knock in this passage

means “go on” and is interpreted by R as “repeat,” this time picking up the earlier thread. In this passage, then, the semantics of the theatrical sign “knocking” are such that the acts of reception and interpretation become overtly problematic. Reader and Listener struggle to communicate with each other (in performance, Reader may well get annoyed in the process!), and the struggle over meaning is passed on to us audience members. What are we to make of this? And did the knocking, in the context of this passage, mean “repeat” and not “stop”/ “go on” all along? But if so, “repeat” exactly what and from where?

The subsequent knocking contexts (3) and (4) delineate along similar lines, while in (5) “nothing is left to tell,” as a variation to the formula “little is left to tell,” unambiguously signals closure. The final two knocks, the last audible elements of this performance, are emphatic requests “go on!,” made in reaction against the Reader’s non-verbal action of closing the book, eventually. Now the knocks are like heart-beats, in the final moments as the “book of life” (is that what it has been all along?) is being closed. The “fade-out” is performative, communicative and existential at the same time. Script, performance and life peter out at the same time.

It is important to make the point that Reader and Listener, “alone together” as they were all this time, have been able to communicate with each other. But it was arduous, fraught with difficulties and misunderstandings, a half-successful mode of communication between people who know and do not know each other. This in fact appears to be the only aspect of *Ohio Impromptu* that is clear and uncontentious, whereas just about everything else remains uncertain and ambiguous: are Reader and Listener two separate individuals or are we dealing with (not quite perfect) mirror images of the same person? Is the book’s narrative based on their or his experience (or her experience – the gender of Reader and Listener respectively is never specified) or is it an extraneous story with little or no bearing on individual experience(s) of the play’s character(s)? And do the two sign-systems “stage” and “page,” i.e. theatre performance and book narrative, converge at the very end?

An autobiographical reading of *Ohio Impromptu* involving both James Joyce – symbolically present in the reference to the river Seine (Isle of Swans) and by way of the large black hat at the centre of the table, of the kind that Joyce was well-known to be wearing – and Beckett’s wife Suzanne has been put forth as authorially endorsed by Beckett’s biographer James Knowlson, although Knowlson is quick to note that “through its visual and verbal imagery, it [sc. the play] manages to transcend any purely personal inspiration” (KNOWLSON 1996: 586; cf. SLOTE 2013: 156). An existentialist interpretation seems difficult to resist: the sense of life, including marriage, as time spent “alone together” (one of the play’s key phrases) is certainly widespread, and the notion of the play as a self-reflexive reading in the “book of (one’s) life” easily suggests itself. A meta-poetic and theory-driven reading, finally, is also quite compelling (as it is in other Beckett pieces for the theatre, especially *Catastrophe* and, slightly less so, *Play*). This is the reading that should be highlighted in the present context to demonstrate the contribution of PLC-inspired semiotic thinking.

That *Ohio Impromptu* can be considered “skeletal theatre” has already been discussed, as well as Beckett’s powerful exploration of the fact that the theatrical sign generated by the human body cannot possibly be replicated exactly. Also prominent is the question how text and performance are inter-related. Every single word spoken by Reader is scripted in the most literal sense of being read out from a book – except for one single word:

In his extremity his old terror of night laid hold on him again. After so long a lapse that as if never been. [*Pause. Looks closer.*] **Yes** [my emphasis], after so long a lapse as if never been. Now with redoubled force the fearful symptoms described at length page forty paragraph four. [*Starts to turn back the pages. Checked by L’s left hand. Resumes relinquished page.*] (BECKETT 1986: 446)

The Reader’s self-assuring “Yes” when faced with an ungrammatical sentence is – or in performance at least pretends to be – unscripted and, yes, “impromptu.” The passage also features Listener’s most forceful physical intervention which can also be read meta-poetically: in the linear progression of performance (like life) there is no “turning back the page.”

The near-identity of book-script and performance-narrative, of “page” and “stage,” in *Ohio Impromptu* also highlights pointedly what performance adds to the experience: immediacy, enacted affective response on the stage and a multi-sensory aesthetic experience for the audience. Listener’s knocking, the signature gesture of the play, has an exposed function in this context, and it is here that a semiotic approach is not just helpful but in fact indispensable. The knocking with one’s knuckles – a tactile, aural and visual sign which is most commonly used in a context where it means “let me in” (i.e. door-knocking) – is subject to *aktualizace* as defined by Mukařovský, a de-automation of its common function and meaning. As Šlaisová (2012: 157f.) points out, *aktualizace* for Mukařovský has a strong temporal dimension, something which is in fact very prominent in *Ohio Impromptu* where, as just demonstrated, the meaning of the knocking *shifts over time* and very much depends on the immediate context at various points in the play. Thereby the process of semiosis itself is both highlighted and problematized.

Beckett also powerfully enacts what Honzl (2016 [1940]) has termed “the mobility of the theatrical sign” in that the knocking takes on the role of words and even assumes the quality of a language in its own right. The arbitrariness of the sign is also underlined: the same sign (knocking) can have opposite meanings (“stop” and “go on”) and/or have uncertain meaning (“repeat?”). All of this requires interpretive work by the decoder (both on-stage and in the audience) who is trying to make sense of it all and whose quest for meaning may remain frustratingly inconclusive. Theatre, like life, is not “an open book” but hard work. Moreover, the enormous power of non-verbal sign systems becomes impressively obvious not just by means of the knocking, but also through blocking, costume and the corresponding yet intriguingly different stage figures of Reader and Listener.

Typical of Beckett is the extremism with which select signs or sign systems are being deployed. Reader completely embodies his assigned role and is “all reading” (hence “all speech”) whereas Listener embodies the exact opposite and is “all listening” (hence “all silence”). The commonly used label “minimalism” for Beckett’s theatre is therefore misleading in the sense that select sign systems are often being used in an extreme and, so to speak, maximalist manner. Both the knocking and the (near-)identical costume in *Ohio Impromptu* are instances of such maximalist use, which gives these sign systems dominant functions, in this case throughout the whole performance. In fact, minimalism and maximalism correlate dialectically, here and elsewhere in Beckett (maximal speed of delivery coupled with minimal intelligibility in *Play*, for instance).

## The need for semiotics

An Aristotelian model is not completely useless when confronted with theatre art like *Ohio Impromptu* or other Beckett pieces for the stage. Plot, character and dramatic structure, the key areas of interest for this approach, are invariably being handled by Beckett in such innovative and unconventional ways that it is helpful, by way of contrast, to look at them against the backdrop of the Western dramatic tradition and the Aristotelian theoretical model which is both based on this tradition but also very much helped shape it. In that sense, the Aristotelian model is certainly “good to think with” (or “think against,” rather) when it comes to something like Beckett. At the end of the day, however, the Aristotelian model provides only slim pickings here. It ultimately does not know what to do with the range, diversity, originality and sheer extremism of Beckett’s theatre. Put bluntly, the Aristotelian model is deaf to Listener’s knocking, blind to Winnie’s entombment and nothing but baffled by M, W1 and W2 speaking rapidly while being stuck in urns. Here the contribution of semiotics, with its holistic vista and analytical perceptiveness, is absolutely vital in that here is an approach capable of detecting and analysing these ranges and their nuances properly. If I have been correct in arguing that Beckett’s dramatic work can be regarded as a “stress test” for models of theatre theory, then Aristotelianism fails this one, while semiotics passes it with flying colours.

A final question should be addressed. If, historically speaking, at least part of the success of semiotics rests on the fact that it provided a theoretical framework for the theatre of the historical avant-garde which the traditional Aristotelian approach proved to be largely unsuitable for, has the semiotic approach itself come under duress with the emergence of a new “stress test,” namely post-dramatic theatre in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century? Initially, one might be inclined to give an affirmative answer to this question, perhaps because post-dramatic theatre forms may seem so confusingly different and complex. For what this is worth, Hans-Thies Lehmann, when trying to come up with a theoretical framework designed to cope with theatre forms which he branded “post-dramatic” in his seminal and highly influential 1999-book, did not explicitly mention semiotics as a corner-stone of his theorizing (nor

is Beckett considered an early post-dramatic theatre artist, as he could and perhaps should be) (LEHMANN 1999).

In practice, however, semiotics effectively very much *is* a cornerstone of Lehmann's thinking. His section on "Panorama of post-dramatic theatre" and the subsequent chapters on performance, text, space, time, body and media all constantly show semiotic thinking in practice if not in the concomitant rhetoric and lingo. There is a good reason for this. Like Beckett's stage works, the montages, juxtapositions, discontinuities, decelerations and associative dreamscapes of Robert Wilson and other theatre artists commonly labelled post-dramatic also call for semiotic ways of analysis, possibly even more so. While the question "what does it all mean?" is usually even more pointless here than with Beckett, the fundamental semiotic question "how are the expressive channels of the theatre being used in theatrical communication to generate a distinct aesthetic experience?" is an extremely helpful one to put to this kind of art – and it would seem fair to predict that will continue to be so for whatever art forms will be created by theatre-makers of the future.<sup>5</sup>

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