



Preface

The Many Nations of Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett's writing was transnational in his own lifetime. Born in Ireland in 1906, he first attempted a career in the literary circles of the Irish Free State, and due both to censorship by that regime and his own Continental creative impulses, he became one of the many Irish writers who lived in self-imposed geographic and linguistic exile. From the 1930s to his death in 1989, he lived mostly in Paris, though with lengthy and important stays in England and Germany. After international acclaim (and perhaps notoriety) for *Waiting for Godot*, which had been performed in numerous countries and languages by the end of the 1950s, winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969 cemented his status as one of the giants in a broadly Euro-centric canon (though a Japanese writer, Yasunari Kawabata, had preceded him in that prize in 1968). Unlike many writers from his (long) historical period and his (small) spiritual community, however, Samuel Beckett's importance has seemed to grow with time, rather than shrink. Two decades into the present century, his work continues to generate interest from scholars, writers, theatre-makers, and audiences, in an ever-growing number of contexts, notably also in Turkey. Why is this?

Beckett's durability and trans-cultural popularity implies that something in his core ideas, expressed across sixty years of writing in genres as diverse as poetry, criticism, prose, drama, film, radio,

television, and letters, is extremely important. Evidence would suggest that this importance is also not culturally specific, but rather accessible to people from a large number of ethnic, national, and linguistic backgrounds. Foremost among these “core ideas” of Beckett is one that is has profound philosophical and political implications: the instability of language itself. It is language *as such* that crafts human memories, stories, and history as a form of fiction. The fact that all people are embedded in this field of incomplete narrative results in unstable identities, and often leads to conflict. The performance of his plays and prose texts, which often pivot around a “story of the storyteller” through a careful arrangement of strategic voids, thus becomes a resonator for the deep ambivalence in Beckett’s work (across genre) between the audible and inaudible, the visible and the invisible, the one and the many.

That different nations have embraced Beckett to a lesser or greater extent at different moments in their history is also, perhaps, key to understanding the political and ethical dimension of his thoughts on language and identity. In Ireland from the 1950s until as late as the early 1990s, Beckett’s novels were considered immoral within the Catholic context, and several were banned. That his plays were illegal in Czechoslovakia under Communist rule in the 1980s suggests that the objection was not about religion as such, but rather about subversive potential. As a witness to the violent atrocities of the entire twentieth century, Beckett critiques power and its operation at a fundamental level, and it is to his credit that in a variety of countries, his work was intolerable to tyrants. There is a risk with such work that it becomes dated, or linked only to one specific political context, but Beckett consciously avoided this limitation. His deliberate “vaguening” of place has made his work widely applicable. He carefully crafted empty spaces in his works that would enable audiences to see themselves, democratically using the audience’s imagination, rather than imposing his own horizon or limiting interpretation.

A writer’s legacy, like literature itself, is mobile in both space and time. The fixed object of a book might give the illusion of stability in literature, but the transmission of the literary thought - especially

in drama - is both embodied and bounded in time. Beckett lives on today through his many readers, auditors, directors, actors, and scholars, indeed through anyone who seeks to think his thought or understand his expression. "Performance" of Beckett, whether in a one-day conference at Hacettepe University or in the theatres of Ankara, remains a vital avenue to ensure that the radical thought of Samuel Beckett can continue to be understood, preserved, enhanced, and disseminated in our present times. An encounter with Beckett always offers the chance to think again about the fundamental question: how best to go on?

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