

## POEMS WITH STAGE DIRECTIONS

Samuel Beckett's plays are not often performed. *Waiting for Godot* comes along every now and then, but the others, especially the short ones, are as rare as one of those migratory birds of which a reported sighting is enough to set off a mass migration of bird-watchers. Having booked a ticket for a recent performance of three of Beckett's short plays which at the last moment I was unable to attend, I felt like a 'twitcher' who arrives just after the bird has flown and can do nothing but get back in the car, throw the binoculars on the back seat and drive sadly home. But there the similarity ends, because although I was unable to watch the performance, I could at least read the plays.

Reading plays is an under-rated activity. My own reading of a play has often given me greater pleasure and taken me closer to the real thing than watching someone else's production. Directors and designers seem increasingly to take the view that their task is not to give as faithful an account as possible of the author's work, but to improve on it. Beckett himself made sure not only that this didn't happen in his lifetime, but that it wouldn't happen after it, by insisting and going on insisting in death that his plays should be performed his way and nobody else's. The price of authenticity is scarcity, but only if you can't read.

Each of the three short plays that I missed (so short that the whole performance lasted less than an hour and came with a warning that late-comers would not be admitted between plays) begins with a page or two of very precise stage directions. 'Stage in darkness but for MOUTH, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow,' is the first thing you read when you open your copy of *Not I*. On the first page of *Footfall* there is a diagram to illustrate precisely how M, the only visible character, paces to and fro along the front of the stage. In *Rockaby* Beckett gives instructions for W's costume, eyes and attitude, the appearance of the rocking chair she sits in and its speed of rocking, the way the lighting should catch her as she rocks and the quality and volume of her recorded voice.

A reader should not be tempted to skim or skip the stage directions. It is as important to read them before you start and to understand them before you read on as it is to read the instructions that come with an item of self-assembly furniture. That was why Beckett put them all at the beginning, so that the lines could be read without interruption and everything put together in the right way. The lines properly assembled make a poem. To call these plays dramatic monologues would be to miss the point. They are plays in which dramatic action is kept to an absolute minimum, its place taken by words. Poems with stage directions.

The same is true of the longer plays, from which action, and sometimes movement, is also missing. Beckett's stage is always as empty as he can make it. *Waiting for Godot*. Act One. A country road. A tree. Evening. Act Two. Next day. Same time. Same place. *Endgame*. Bare interior. Grey light. The aim is to create a space in which only words matter.

In the short plays, perhaps more clearly than in the long ones, the essential characteristics of Beckett's drama are revealed: one or two individuals, their histories partially revealed, not through action but through words, in particular by the repetition of certain words and phrases. Each play is a sifting of memory.

By the end of *Not I* we have pieced together some facts about the woman speaking, of whom all we can see is her mouth. She was born a month premature, she never knew her father, she was brought up in an institution of some kind, she is an elective mute, once or twice a year she breaks her silence in an involuntary and unintelligible outpouring of words, she suffers from tinnitus, she has experienced some kind of quasi-mystical revelation, she talks about

herself in the third person, refusing vehemently (Beckett's word) to accept that the person she is talking about is herself. Hence the title.

In *Footfall* what we hear is a dialogue between mother and daughter. We learn that the mother is about ninety, the daughter about forty, that in her adolescence the daughter began what has become a lifetime of obsessive pacing, that she is an insomniac, that the church is a favourite place for her to pace at night and that she has been known to do so during vespers. The picture that emerges is of someone who suffers from what would now be called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

The recorded voice we hear in *Rockaby* describes a lonely woman looking out of her window at other windows, imagining but not believing in the possibility of there being someone like her behind one of them, until at the end she dies.

One of the characteristics of Beckett's language in these plays is wordplay. In *Rockaby* for example:

*till in the end  
the day came  
in the end came  
close of a long day*

And a few lines later:

*till the day came  
in the end came  
close of a long day  
sitting at her window  
quiet at her window*

Throughout the piece slight variations on these phrases recur, creating in the end a pattern from which a recognisable story gradually takes shape.

*so in the end  
close of a long day  
went down  
in the end went down  
down the deep stair  
let down the blind and down  
right down*

The effect is like that of a piece for piano in which the composer takes a simple phrase and develops it through repetition and variation. Each play has a structure which is as much poetic as dramatic, perhaps more. *Rockaby* is divided into four sections or movements, each ending with a line spoken first by the recorded voice, then by the recorded voice and the woman in the rocking chair together, followed by a long pause. In *Footfall* mother and daughter make parallel speeches in which a conversation between them is reported in the form of dramatic dialogue. The monologue which is the whole of *Not I* is divided into four more or less equal parts by a gesture made, each time less noticeably, by the silent and only half-seen Auditor.

The tension between words and action is inherent in all drama. The moments of despair which come when action runs out and which, in Shakespeare's world, find expression in the repetition of one word, 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,' 'Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing,' are, in Beckett's world, the whole play.

Poems are meant to be read, whether aloud or in silence, but these poetic plays are meant to be performed. They should be performed more often. Performance rights, now that they are held by Beckett's estate, are given sparingly and with as much insistence on the observation of his stage directions as Beckett himself demanded when he was alive. The plays won't be out of copyright until 2060. Another forty-five years of reading poems with stage directions instead of seeing plays performed on stage. Another forty-five years of disappointment for Beckett watchers who don't make it in time.

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