NEWS

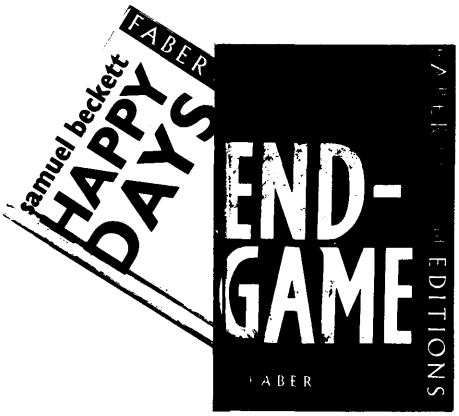
SAMUEL BECKETT (1906–1989)

The last days and months of the 1980s were a time of astonishing social and political upheaval. In the midst of these events, news came from Paris, discreetly and quietly, of the death of Samuel Beckett. No longer now will it be possible to wait expectantly for Beckett's next play to appear, or for Beckett's next prose fragment to come and disturb the carefully formulated assumptions of critics. With Beckett, the English language has lost probably its last great modernist, its last great member of the post-war European avant-garde. There is, of course, much sadness at his passing, and Beckett himself knew only too well how sorely tested words are when it comes to finding the measure of such sadness. For what disappears in death – any death – as Beckett's writing reminds us in the course of its own protracted work of mourning, is something altogether unique and irreplaceable; and with Beckett what has been lost, beyond all recovery, is a possibility of writing. 'The author,' Beckett once remarked in an interview, 'is never of much interest', and it is clear that in Beckett's life the only thing that really counted for him was his writing. And this is perhaps, finally, why his death solicits our attention, for what it signals to us as Beckett's readers is a full stop, an end to a text, to the enactment of a singularity, the invention of a signature: 'you must go on, I can't go on.'

Beckett's singularity as a writer – a writer born and raised in Ireland – has to do with his relationship with language, or, more accurately, with languages, in the plural. Written in French and English, translated by the author to-and-fro across these languages, Beckett's work pays dual allegiance to English and to French, but is the faithful servant of neither. What Beckett's work addresses and reflects are not the problems of language or meaning in themselves (and even less the so-called 'metaphysical condition of modern Man' devised by disconcerted critics in the 1950s or 1960s), but more the movement of a body across and through languages, coming and going, stopping and starting, ingesting and excreting. ('Dish and pot, dish and pot, these are the poles' says Beckett's narrator in *Malone Dies*). Such a body, however, is not an origin outside of language, sexuality or history, nor is it a source of identity or self-presence. It figures rather in Beckett's writing as an oscillation in language and meaning, as a force of affirmation or intensity that deconstitutes the subject and dramatises the fundamental otherness of subjectivity from itself. Words, too, in Beckett are never what they seem or what they take themselves to be. From the outset, in Beckett's texts of the 1930s, they were possessed of an uncontrollable sense of cosmopolitan heterogeneity and alterity, and before long, after the turn to French in 1945, Beckett's writing was to become a relentless elaboration of its own singular language, an idiom of paradox, chiastic indeterminacy, aporetical self-contradiction, rhetorical uncertainty, slippages in register, plays on words, cryptic personal allusions, and, in the late texts from the mid-1960s onwards, a distinctive 'syntax of weakness'. 'In the beginning was the pun,' wrote Beckett in *Murphy* in 1938 and his position scarcely changed: his work allows no founding *logos*, but insists rather on an original displacement or deferral of meaning, on the (literally) dispiriting spectacle of language divided against itself, continually mingled with its other. In Beckett's work, language offers no legitimacy or foundation for self, body, existence or belief; throughout Beckett's writing, words are undone by disturbances they cannot contain but which the texts nonetheless inscribe as they proceed, in contradictory and self-effacing fashion, across languages, religion, the canonic texts of European literature.

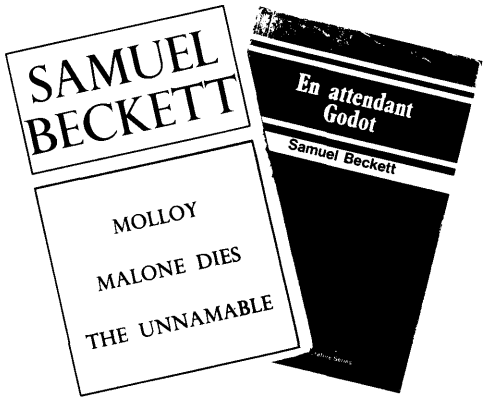
Beckett's writing flickers, oscillates, glimmers, makes obscure. It finds in the rigorous and inescapable materiality of the stage the possibility of animating words as speech issuing from a body, while also infusing words with an excess, an intensity of otherness that refuses to submit to signification. Whence the powerful paradox of his plays, their use of words, gesture, space, to undermine signification and to enact the intensity of what cannot be said but is implicit, bodily, in the act of saying or being spoken. There is here a quality that is unique to Beckett's theatre, and is no doubt best evoked not by a statement or an idea but rather by the sound of a voice, like the cracked whine of Patrick Magee in *Krapp's Last Tape*; or else by an image, like that of Billie Whitelaw in *Not I*, her face blackened into obscurity, her tongue flailing, flapping, pounding out a text that somehow resembles a story but which necessarily falls short of proper embodiment. Like witnesses to some painful ritual, viewers are left gazing from

where they sit at the eerily lit stage or the flickering television screen. Theatre, here, for Beckett, is like a re-enactment of the crucifixion; it becomes an act of exposure to abandonment and suffering, a questioning of religion that shakes the theological substratum of Western thought at its very foundation. And mirrored in the crucifixion is the moment of birth itself, changing in Beckett's work from an act of origination into a series of puzzled enigmas that turn on the impossibility of joining name and flesh, body and language into anything remotely like a classic philosophical subject. Thus it is that, in the trilogy, one reads of the attempts of the man Molloy both to escape and rediscover his mother, or the failed struggle of Malone, in the painful absence of his own father, to play progenitor to himself and to his fictional creations and thus achieve birth, at last. Here, Beckett's writing bears witness to the refuse and litter that has never been properly incorporated



into the universalising dialectic of European history and culture: to the dispersion of languages, the impossibilities of transmission, the agonies of the flesh, the failure of redemption, the ending of Christianity. One remembers that for Adorno, Beckett's dustbins in *Endgame* were 'emblems of the rebuilding of culture after Auschwitz', and it is pertinent to recall that Beckett places *Molloy* in a world that bears the marks of anti-Semitism and the diaspora. In this regard, Beckett's bilingualism is not an advertisement for European integration and the single market, but signs an act of resistance, a refusal to submit to the totalising logic of history and meaning.

Beckett's death has been the occasion for many moving personal tributes to his generosity and kindness: here was Beckett often giving away the money that fame brought him to others whose needs he felt to be greater than his own, or, improbably, keeping publishers afloat by his work, when, after the war, his own trilogy had been turned down by publishers and editors without number. In such anecdotes there is a peculiar and often surprising discrepancy between the Beckett they reveal and his reputation as the brooding author of so many gloomy accounts of the 'human condition'. What this demonstrates is how much Beckett's public image fell victim to the international industry that grew up around his name in the 1950s and 1960s. Beckett is one of only a few contemporary writers to have been turned into an adjective during his own lifetime. Countless critics tackled Beckett with questions about what his works meant, or, when faced with the author's silence, devised theories of their own, identifying this or that influence, this or that major philosophical thinker who had a hand in Beckett's work. Beckett, famously, resisted all these attentions, these reductive misreadings. As a result, he made it possible for his own text to survive the claims of his critics. In this resistance, this desire for survival, what emerges most clearly is the power of Beckett's commit-



ment to an ethics of writing, his respect for the trace of otherness, the alterity and difference at the heart of assumed identity that, for Beckett, was what was at stake in literature.

As I am writing these words, the television news in the background is telling of the release of Nelson Mandela. I am tempted, in closing, because I am moved by both, to search for some link between this, one of the most significant political and human events of recent times, and the event that occupies me here. Is there any discursive space possible in which the two can be made to communicate? Evidently, no such relation exists. There is no common measure that would allow two such events to be homogenised. Beckett's aesthetics and Mandela's political struggle cannot be joined as one. To do so would be to do a disservice to both. Lukács was never more arrogantly conservative or imperiously dialectical than when he repudiated Beckett's work as a 'glorification of the abnormal'. Beckett, accordingly, made no public statements and signed scarcely any petitions. But he did defend his friends in Occupied France. He defended actors, and his fellow dramatists, too, in the person of O'Casey, Arrabal, and, more recently, Vaclav Havel. In dedicating the play *Catastrophe* to Havel in 1982 and having it performed that year at the Avignon festival, Beckett did not offer an analysis of State tyranny in Czechoslovakia, nor did he pay tribute to Havel's campaign for human rights in his country, he did something else: he bore witness to the other's enforced silence.

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