



10 Samuel Beckett and Poland

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I

Concerning Beckett, my attitude is rather negative. One of the tendencies of the capitalist world leans undoubtedly towards the complete alienation of man. For Beckett, it is the fundamental tendency against which no resistance is possible. On this basis he makes formal experiments. He reminds me of determinism and naturalism [. . .] He belongs to those who isolate man from the rest, as the young Maeterlinck.

This severe judgement by the Marxist critic and philosopher György Lukács sounds like an anathema in countries in which Marxism had assumed the position of state church. Indeed, until 1989, Beckett's works were neither published nor staged in most of Eastern Europe. Poland (along with Hungary) was a notable exception: in these countries, the spirit of communism had a very hard time firmly establishing itself.

To most Marxist critics in the 1950s and 1960s, in both West and East, Beckett's works were merely symptomatic, a handy and literary diagnosis, an illustration of the state – and this means of course the state of *decline* – of contemporary Western societies. As much a class-oriented scholar as Lukács, the young Lucien Goldmann, who was among 'the well-dressed, elegant audience watching people torturing each other' on the stage of Théâtre de Babylone in early 1953, commented with bewilderment and anger: 'Such degradation of man, that's what they want, let them have it, let them roar with laughter, fools, they don't know it's good training for them, an anaesthetic. When they're done, they'll build concentration camps' (Miłosz 2001, 10).

Goldmann's outburst is quoted by Czesław Miłosz, who accompanied the young French thinker on that night. It would be difficult to maintain that Miłosz, a Polish *émigré* writer who around that time defected to the West, took sides with the Marxists. On the contrary. In his report on seeing *Waiting for Godot*, in the book of essays *Private Obligations*, having stated that for Beckett humanity is an assembly of broken dolls, each of which, taken separately, is redundant, superfluous, Miłosz proceeds with his sarcastic estimate: 'For half of the audience, Godot had already come and was sitting in the Kremlin, smoking his pipe. If it was true what his defamers were whispering, 10 or 15 broken dolls behind bars testified to his glory' (Miłosz 2001, 12).





164 *International Reception of Samuel Beckett*

Yet despite all differences, there is a certain similarity to Goldmann's and Miłosz' approach to Beckett. Both see his work as a symptom of, and testimony to some kind of socio-cultural development. Although, as Miłosz maintains, Goldmann was a slave to his doctrine, this doctrine remained at the service of his 'offended moral sense' (10). Thus Miłosz recognizes Goldmann's diagnosis, and notices the point beyond mere prejudice: 'What should one think of a civilization which can boast of breathtaking scientific discoveries, sends spacecraft to other planets, and at the same time recognizes itself in a writer like Beckett?' (10–11). That is to say, a writer who tears scabs of anthropological pathos off the legend of a proud mankind, in which past generations have indulged with such relish? For Miłosz, Beckett is a writer of cold and objective truths, a radical who has stopped ('heroically', as he says, not without irony) at reduction – unlike, for example, T.S. Eliot or Simone Weil. Beckett is full of compassion, admits Miłosz, so full indeed that 'he can hardly bear it' (11), a writer determined to persuade his reader or viewer 'that the worst truth is better than the most beautiful lie' (the truth being that it would be better not to have been born than to live), ready to 'torture with the obvious', a writer resembling someone harrying a hunchback by saying: 'you're a hunchback, you'd rather not be reminded of it, but I shall see to it that you are reminded' (Miłosz 1985, 241 and 243). It is as though Beckett was striving to produce in his work a certain model of the world to which both Miłosz and Goldmann objected.

However, this is not exactly Miłosz's perspective on human kind. Neither is it his vision of the task of literature, but the Polish writer, disturbed by Beckett's explorations, is nevertheless moved by the honesty of his vision (Peter Brook's view of Beckett's 'honest vision' comes to mind here), and acknowledges that more than literature is at stake. Indeed, Miłosz recognizes Beckett's prominent stature among contemporary writers in a passage of his book *The Land of Ulro*:

If a civilization is retrievable through its works, anyone wishing to plumb the essence of our modern civilization should turn to its most honest writer, Samuel Beckett. It is a tribute to the capitalist West, despite what has been said of its decline, that it could produce such a writer and acknowledge that writer as its own – that it could endorse the naked truth, in other words. (Miłosz 1985, 240)

According to Miłosz, Beckett declares (and testifies to it) that the THERE-IS-NO situation (the result of Nietzsche's and Dostoevsky's 'there is no God') has now been realized on a mass scale. There is no divine transcendence, no moral good and evil, no hope and no Kingdom; even the proud individual has not been spared or saved. True to his Proustian inspiration, Beckett, in Miłosz' view, is left only with time, the harbinger of death, time to be arbitrarily filled with human activity, which is reduced to the status of a mere *divertissement*. Art is one of a whole gamut of them, and here, too, Beckett is merciless. His work proves that the last bulwark of imagination has been captured, that imagination, which since the eighteenth century had defended itself by multi-layered irony, has now been mortally attacked from the inside and left bereft of any ontological support. Thus Beckett's art, as Miłosz perceives it, reflects artistry feeding on the decline of artistry, and *Endgame* uplifts, for a short while, one more 'Endgame'.¹ For Lukacs, Goldmann and Miłosz, all differences notwithstanding, Beckett's work is considered merely symptomatic. Although form is treated with indifference





and its message reduced to the historical–sociological dimension, this work has been elevated to something bearing testimony to what was the most vital pre-occupation of the time.

II

With Miłosz out of the country, it was up to several intellectuals in Warsaw to admit Beckett to the circle of authors who mattered. These few individuals, as it happened, brought the Irish writer from Paris (as he was perceived) to the heart of cultural discourse in the country. He was to become a part of an effort to save Poland from losing its cultural identity, at a time when culture was in the firm grip of the party ideologues, and, even more, of the party bureaucrats. *Waiting for Godot* opened at Warsaw's Contemporary Theatre (Teatr Współczesny) in January 1957, 4 years after the first Paris production, but only one and a half years after the premières in London and Dublin, and just a few months after New York. One might consider it a happy accident, for it was far from obvious and rather an exception than a rule that Beckett's work, imported from the West, should – given the political situation – be presented. *Waiting for Godot* was not officially received as a political play (which is why it was allowed), but its staging was, willy-nilly, a political act. The production went ahead because it was made possible by those whose permission was necessary to stage any play in a Warsaw theatre. Nevertheless, its message clearly suggested that waiting for Godot might be like waiting for socialism, waiting for the fulfilment of all the vain promises in the name of which the communist rulers demanded sacrifices from society. In 1959, Beckett's play was taken off the repertoire of Istanbul's Kucuk Sahne theatre, three nights after the opening, because for the police Godot personified communism, which they feared. However, if the title protagonist is never meant to appear, they should have been rather supportive of Beckett's message. In Warsaw, on the contrary, it was this very substitution of Godot with communism that by rights should have alerted the authorities, yet they chose to ignore it.

October 1956 marked the final stage of the de-Stalinization of the ruling totalitarian party, the process initiated in Moscow in 1953 with Stalin's death and crowned 3 years later by the death of Poland's president Boleslaw Bierut, which fittingly occurred also in Moscow while he was on a state visit. Thus the darkest period of repression, between 1948 and 1953, came to an end, a period which was comparable to the Nazi era in Germany.

Bierut's cultural propaganda had to a great degree followed Andrey Zhdanov's line, who, having started the campaign against the arts and literature in a savage attack on Akhmatova and Zoshchenko, proclaimed in 1946 that henceforth all art must be politically inspired and understood, and that the party spirit was to become the principal tenet of literature. Soviet culture was to free itself of 'servility before the West', and all vestiges of cosmopolitanism were to be ferreted out. This was given priority above the positive propaganda for socialist realism, which produced sterile, manipulative literature of the type of the workers' novel. The Zhdanov doctrine was introduced to Poland a little later, and in a slightly weaker form, and was declared dead relatively soon. Had it lasted longer, the effects might have been disastrous.

By comparison, the years 1956 through 1989, the unduly protracted period of





166 *International Reception of Samuel Beckett*

'real socialism', were marked by repression on a smaller scale and were somewhat milder in character. In its effort to give legitimacy to the so-called workers' democracy, the regime, led by bureaucrats who were sooner or later replaced by others of rivalling factions, sought the support of the intelligentsia by playing 'the cultural card'. This amounted to leaving a narrow space of freedom which, overstepped, could be revoked, a policy which left some brilliant minds with the dilemma of whether to oppose the government openly or rather, resigned to the expectation that party domination would be lasting, go along the Marxist path, in the hope of doing least damage to whatever could be saved from political savagery. The era of post-Stalinist communism was a sinusoid-like timeline of party overtures alternating with crackdowns. The periods of greater freedom of expression coincided with a more liberal policy towards the West. Years of opening the door a little, in 1957 to 1962, in 1971 and in 1979, alternated with those of shutting the door, when freedom suffered setbacks, as in 1968, 1976 and 1981. At last, the whole thing imploded in 1989. The door was hardly open during the periods of frost, but Polish artists, writers and scholars could always hope for a thaw: meteorological metaphors adequately illustrate the spirit of the time.

Letting ideas from the West enter the country at a time when its borders were largely sealed was a privilege of those happy few picked by the party, who enjoyed the trust of the apparatchiks. It was their task to probe the limits of the party's tolerance and see how far they could go. When they crossed the line of open politics, they could expect personal consequences, being aware however that once they had been given important positions, it would be more difficult for the party to dismiss them, though such cases were by no means unheard of.

Obviously, there were many factions among those intellectuals who toed the party line, with the major divide between those advocating the more enlightened kind of Marxism, somewhat more sympathetic to what was labelled a universally humanitarian approach, and those clearly hostile to the West. The tactics of the brighter camp were to 'smuggle in' as much European and American culture as possible, while avoiding works with an overtly political message, though even this was tolerated when accompanied by critical notes, disclaimers and commentaries in the guise of 'we should know the opposite camp in order to better fight them'. Literary life, including the literary reception of Western works, proceeded in a very particular way, according to strange patterns that are difficult to explain briefly to those not familiar with Polish reality.

Introducing new European writing and art after a decade and a half of first war, then ideological embargo, was a hide-and-seek game with the censors, which in many cases ended with a prominent author being relegated to the 'revisionist' camp. Before this happened, however, a *fait accompli* had usually already occurred.

In the theatre, one way of not having to advocate so-called socialist themes was to turn to the classics and present their message as a kind of pre-Marxist social criticism. Shakespeare or Molière came in handy for that purpose. Moreover, their plays could easily become a coded vehicle for discussing the contemporary issues of freedom and repression, or national causes at the time when these were subordinate to the proletarian internationalism of the Kremlin. The art of allusion, at times a very thinly veiled allusion, flourished in Poland all the way until 1989.

The première of *Godot* was a most direct and practical demonstration of the fact that an essentially non-naturalistic production of poetical drama can be





truthful, and hence realistic, to a degree never achieved in works advocated by the propagators of socialist realism.

III

The repertoire of Warsaw's Contemporary Theatre for the season 1956/57 featured Aldous Huxley, Armand Salacrou, Henri de Montherlant, Thornton Wilder and Samuel Beckett; quite a change from the typical programmes of previous years. The newly founded drama journal, *Dialog*, printed extensive fragments of *Waiting for Godot* in its very first issue of late 1956. For the director, Jerzy Kreczmar, the production was a good opportunity to abandon the naturalistic *manière*, and follow the line of a philosophical circus. Beckett, who saw the Warsaw photographs, wrote to Kreczmar saying that it seemed exactly the sort of performance he wanted – 'very Chaplinesque'. He particularly liked the idea of the Boy wearing a bowler hat.

The reviewer of the daily *Trybuna Ludu*, Poland's equivalent of *Pravda* and *Renminjibao*, having asked himself the hypothetical question 'whether it was correct to stage Beckett's play in our country?', replied: 'The answer is not difficult: in order to fight the ideological enemy, one has to get to know it thoroughly' (Jaszcz 1957). 'Great art, marvellous performance', a critic of the more liberal weekly *Przekrój* (*Cross-section*) praised Beckett, predicting that 'among younger adepts of literature he will find more imitators than Hemingway and Hlasko together' (Kožniewski 1957). Another of the old-guard theatre critics of the time reminisced later: 'The event which changed overnight not only the theatrical taste, but also the character of directing and the actor's playing style was the introduction of the plays of the new avant-garde. [...] Although not often played, Beckett became the representative of the whole literary current and 'Waiting for Godot' became a proverbial concept' (Marczak-Oborski 1985, 294).

Jan Kott entitled his review 'Boredom almost genial' (Kott 1957). Later on, when asked about the place of Bertolt Brecht in Polish theatre, he said: 'We do him when we want fantasy. When we want realism we do *Waiting for Godot*'. This remark well illustrates the critical *esprit* of Beckett's reception in Poland at that time. The Warsaw *Godot* marked the beginning of a new era in the history of post-war Polish theatre, and Beckett's name was to be synonymous with its renewal.

Behind this spectacular debut was a circle of minds that included Adam Tarn, Jan Kott, Jan Błoński and the theatre director Jerzy Kreczmar. Kott and Błoński wrote reviews of the Paris production of *Godot* for the Polish press, Tarn published the text and Kreczmar staged it in Julian Rogoziński's translation. The critics were particularly impressed by Tadeusz Fijewski's Estragon.

Adam Tarn (1901–75) began as a translator and playwright of 'antibourgeois' works, such as *Zwykła sprawa* (*A Common Case*, 1950), played in a US courtroom where, to quote one reviewer, 'the deliberation of the jury is a perfect occasion to show how corruption and blackmail help the American authorities achieve their dirty goal' (Beylin 1951). A party member, Tarn was allowed at the very beginning of the thaw to launch the drama journal *Dialog*, which brought to light a whole *pleiade* of Western authors. He was also quite a maverick, for the newest plays by Adamov, Beckett, Ionesco, Frisch and Albee would come out in one





168 *International Reception of Samuel Beckett*

single issue, something hardly any drama monthly in the West could afford, along with the most important Polish writing of the time. Tarn organized meetings on major playwrights like Dürrenmatt and took part in discussions abroad, thus serving as a good example of party openness and of what the regime did not really stand for: freedom of expression. He even managed to install, as his deputy editor-in-chief, the much younger Konstanty Puzyna, who not only did not belong to the party, but was also part of 'the enemy class'. Such strange combinations, though not typical, were by no means an exception. But then, during one of the periods of cyclical turbulences in 1968, Tarn fell from the graces of the authorities, was simply dropped from his chair at *Dialog* and invited to leave the country. Samuel Beckett, always sensitive to the issue of censorship and exile, sent letters of support for Tarn in an attempt to help him start up a literary magazine in Canada, offering financial assistance as well.

Jan Kott (1914–2001) was another die-hard Marxist around 1950, who at the time advocated the most 'progressive' of literary genres, the socialist enterprise novel, and actively fought the obscure forces of feudalism and clericalism. He was a critic with enough power to make young writers who did not fall into the progressive category unknown overnight, and guilty of purges of the classics (to mention his infamous attack on Joseph Conrad). However, Tarn developed over time into a fervent supporter of Western plays and an advocate of a rather bourgeois approach to classical drama. Kott's academic bestseller of 1962, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, was an attempt at reading Shakespeare through the (collective and individual) experiences of the twentieth century. The chapter, *King Lear or Endgame* states in effect that Beckett and the grotesque (which the author identified with the *modus existientiae* of contemporary tragedy) basically stood for what Shakespeare was all about in our day and age. The Warsaw professor's book, read in the French translation by the director Peter Brook, influenced the latter's own interpretation of Shakespeare when he cast Paul Scofield as Lear at the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford in 1962, as well as in the 1971 film version.

Kott's analysis derived Beckett's main concerns from Shakespearean themes, and stressed his pessimism – not vague, ideologically charged Western pessimism, but one understood universally. His conviction that the key to *our* Shakespeare was to be found in Beckett was, as it happened, tantamount to stating that we should read Beckett with *King Lear* and the *Book of Job* in mind.² The Bible and Shakespeare are at Beckett's horizon was Kott's main point. This approach was to prevail among sympathetic critics in Poland for years to come.

Jan Kott gradually drifted away from the proscribed line; in 1957 he left the same party which had promoted him to the high office of communist oracle, and later even signed petitions against censorship. He nevertheless continued to be allowed more freedom than others and formally kept his chair at Warsaw University until 1969, though he was already living in the West. It was difficult to wipe out the written word, so that his works, although not encouraged anymore, did not disappear from the libraries.

Jerzy Kreczmar (1902–85) was a director who remained faithful to the text of the plays he produced, but staged them only when he himself had something important to say. His style stressed logic and clarity, which was beneficial for the Beckett text, the unconventional poetics of which led many to believe that all it exposed was the formless and the insignificant. Kreczmar's production of *Godot*





stressed the specific order of the play. He thoroughly examined the material for the actors in an analytical way, which was by no means the norm in those early years of Beckett's reception anywhere. He grasped, for example, the intellectual argument and the logic in Lucky's seemingly disordered speech, something which he later eloquently elucidated in a lecture published in *Dialog* in 1971.

Jan Błoński (1931–), a brilliant critic and translator of, among others, Ionesco and Genet, known for his seemingly impressionistic and not at all pedantic style, sparkling with erudition yet easy to read, was capable of breathtaking shortcuts which could take the reader directly from the periphery to the heart of the examined work or subject. Erudition, intuition and literary flair, combined with the thematic range of his writings, have made Błoński the most outstanding critic of his generation. Apart from widely read volumes of criticism on what is most important in Polish post-war literature, domestic and *émigré*, he authored studies on Proust and Beckett, the importance of which stands in contrast to the length of his concise texts.

IV

The beginning of a new era, apart from re-establishing ties with the West, brought about the rehabilitation and re-evaluation of Poland's pre-war *avant-garde* tradition. The thaw of 1956 was the right moment to bring back into literary circulation the names of the reformers of Polish modernism, much despised and treated as 'the deformers' by those who wanted to impose socialist realism. Among the writers meant to fall into oblivion were Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz and Bruno Schulz, who both died during the war, and their younger colleague Witold Gombrowicz, who had lived in Argentina since 1939. Witkiewicz (1875–1939) in particular, a painter, art theoretician and philosopher as well as a novelist and playwright, emphasized, throughout his career, like Beckett, form and the metaphysical. He postulated a new type of play that disregards the traditional norms of *la pièce bien-faite*, long before Martin Esslin coined the term 'Theatre of the Absurd'. As early as 1919, Witkiewicz formulated his idea of 'the play as a whole' which 'grows out of a sincere need on the part of the author to create a theatrical idiom capable of expressing metaphysical feelings within purely formal dimensions', 'a play in which the performance itself, existing independently in its own right and not as a heightened picture of life, would be able to put the spectator in the position to experience metaphysical feeling' (Witkiewicz 1990, 99).

Witold Gombrowicz (1904–69), another major figure of Polish modernism, maintained the same anti-traditionalist stance as Beckett, both blaming the anti-nomic nature of language for its inadequacy and holding it responsible for its failure to express the true self. Linguistically provocative, Gombrowicz enjoyed, with truly Beckettian relish, the psychology of the contradictory.

As Beckett, especially in his earlier work, Gombrowicz was known for his resentment of the replete, the solemn and one's 'own', and mocked religious bigotry. On the biographical level, both writers lived in exile and at times had an extremely difficult *rapport* with their native countries. Gombrowicz's sarcasm towards Poland in this respect matches that of Beckett for Ireland. Precocious minds, they were both late-comers to the theatre (*Godot* and *The Wedding* by Gombrowicz were written almost at the same time) and both experienced their





170 *International Reception of Samuel Beckett*

first stage triumphs in Paris. Shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in 1969, Gombrowicz died 3 months before it was awarded to Samuel Beckett.

Although we won't necessarily find many similarities between the Irish writer and Witkiewicz or Gombrowicz in the substance of their *oeuvre*, they shared principal attitudes. To the Polish ear Beckett's name, standing for the lack of enthusiasm for our bright future, his moral scepticism and courage in literary form, rhymes with the reflections and innovations of the two Polish authors. Indeed, Beckett can even be seen as a kind of bridge between Poland's pre-war writers and those who began writing drama during the thaw. Witkiewicz's pure form and Esslin's concept of the absurd converged in Warsaw around 1960.

V

One of the young talents who made his debut at that time, Sławomir Mrożek (1930–), was to become Poland's most prominent playwright of the second half of the twentieth century. He has mentioned the name of Beckett in his interviews and conversations, and on several occasions has talked with Jan Błoński about the Irish author. He eventually met Beckett in the seventies at the TV studio in Stuttgart; the meeting, not devoid of silences, was beautifully documented by the photographer Hugo Jehle.

The press and academics alike have put Mrożek into the same drawer as Beckett, who was in turn treated as part of the absurdist movement. Even if similarities can be found (for example, the satirical vein of the Polish writer could remind us of early Beckett), the sanctifying of social and Polish themes by Mrożek and the somewhat pedagogical zeal inherent in much of his writing, as well as his absurdism of the heavily 'conceptual' type, clearly puts his drama in a different compartment than Beckett's. A more obvious affinity exists between Mrożek and Ionesco, or Mrożek and Adamov and Arrabal, while the power games and the sense of manipulation in Mrożek's drama do smack a bit of Harold Pinter. One critic labels the work of the Polish playwright 'applied absurd', showing faith in rationalism and giving meaning to national traditions as opposed to the 'meta-physical absurd' prevailing in France and England.

'The essential difference between the works of Western absurdist writers and the stage plays by Mrożek', as M. Sugiera remarks, is that 'while they define the absurd at its ontological level, showing human loneliness in the universe and directly appealing to the spectator's emotions, Mrożek prefers the ethical plane where the absurd proves to be the improvable result of human decision, requiring from the spectators both their cool distance and common-sense estimation' (Sugiera 1992, 285).

As to the existence of the 'eastern drama of the absurd', in the opinion of this critic, Mrożek would share the label with a writer of a different temperament, in whose work the name of Beckett appears directly in the text. Tadeusz Różewicz (1921–), next to Wisława Szymborska Poland's most distinguished living poet, started his career in 1945 as a lyrical voice declaring that singing poetry after concentration camps was sacrilegious. His evolution, sparked by the irrationality of what had happened and the feelings of guilt for having survived, was guided by antinomy and inconsequence of the most Beckettian type. He pronounced life no longer possible, then, in spite of all, lived on. He pronounced poetry dead, then, in





spite of it, indulged in writing poems, though stripped of all ornamentation and coquetry. Then, having temporarily found an antidote for war trauma in unbridled somaticism and the daily business of life, he eventually found death in it as well, latent, but more universal.

Temperamentally on the same wavelength as some of Beckett's famous outcasts, Różewicz, around 1960, posing as a simpleton, learned and sceptical, took to drama to convey his vision. His first play, *Kartoteka (The Card Index)*, is made up of a loose sequence of scenes around the body of the voluntarily bed-ridden protagonist. A war survivor, now deeply buried in the shallow Polish back-to-normal, he is called by many proper names, and from one scene to the next changes his identity (a grown-up, an adolescent, a boy). Remaining in bed, he wanders through his past, while at the same time memories flow through him, images, scraps of information, bits of past sensations, fragments of useless knowledge.

The Card Index, written just a couple of years after the Warsaw première of *Waiting for Godot* and thus at the peak of Beckett's notoriety in Poland, is a literary dialogue with the Irish writer. The name 'Beckett' is uttered by the oracle when the Chorus uses it as an argument for the passive hero to start 'doing something': 'Get the plot going, pick your nose or something [. . .] Even in Beckett someone prattles, waits, suffers, dreams, someone cries, falls, agonizes, farts. Move or you'll be the death of the theatre' (Różewicz 1972, 25'; my translation). Curiously, *The Card Index* makes me think of *Eleutheria*, of its atmosphere, even the montage of scenes, although Różewicz could not have known about Beckett's play, at that time lying in his drawer destined to be published posthumously.

Another excursion into Beckett territory (and perhaps that of Ionesco) was Różewicz's play *Population Growth (Przyrost naturalny, 1958–66)*. It is predominantly a document of Różewicz's somaticism, which had restored the lyrical ego to his life. There are suggestions of the mental space of a writer, and an intense somatic quality to the play. The soma quite literally fills up the whole stage, while pregnant women chat about fertility. It is also a document of Różewicz's distrust of mysticism, a reaction to a vision of dignified dying, and dying preceded by reduction and disappearance. The play is a kind of *Le Dépeupleur à rebours*. Instead of the cylindrical interior which is being emptied, we have an angular one which is being filled up – for Różewicz, a vision of death as legitimate as Beckett's phasing out. Our daily existence is absurdly crowded, full of other people, other bodies, other births, other deaths. Similar seems the pole towards which the scenic reality gravitates in another play by Różewicz, *Old Woman Brooding (Stara kobieta wysiaduje, 1968)*. The unbridled eruption of images is a direct stage demonstration of the growing of the organic mass which leads to decomposition and blind fertility in the midst of waste cooling off before our eyes. Some of the metaphors here could come directly from the lips of Maddy Rooney.

In the later phase of the Polish poet's work, the process of dying, a concern equally important for him as it was for Beckett, is located directly in the body of the artist. Kafka, Bacon and Beckett become protagonists of his works. In his play *The Trap (Pułapka, 1982)*, the body is the trap into which Kafka fell at the moment of his birth. Closed up in the claustrophobic setting, the protagonist becomes nauseous when confronted with fertility, procreation and the institution of marriage. Beckett, the writer, also becomes a hero in two late poems by Różewicz, in which the themes are solitude and old age.





172 *International Reception of Samuel Beckett*

The Beckettian mode is something that has been noticed and discussed by critics in quite a number of works written in Polish towards the end of the twentieth century. There are, if not direct references to Beckett or clear signs of influence, things that make us think of Beckett. Mention could be made, for example, of writers such as Ireneusz Iredyński, writing with Beckettian overtones, and Janusz Głowacki, whose plays, especially *Antigone from New York*, show the climate of Beckett's eccentric characters. In this play, Manhattan's underprivileged includes a black, a Russian and a Polish down-and-out camping in an urban park.

VI

Beckett was present throughout the whole period of 'real socialism', from 1956 to 1989, as a fixed point of reference, and perhaps even as a sort of catalytic element between the pre-war experiments of Witkiewicz and the intellectual stage projections of Mrozek and beyond. It should then be no surprise that he became a point of reference not only of dramatic writing but also of performance practice. One example of how his name was projected on Polish theatrical life is the reading of Tadeusz Kantor's 'theatre of death' by Konstanty Puzyna, editor-in-chief of *Dialog* after Tarn's departure. He recognizes in Tadeusz Kantor's *Dead Class* the same effort 'to expose the breach', the gap of memory which also animates Beckett's world: 'The old cronies, evoking their past around the time Gavrilo Princip shot the Archduke Ferdinand, end up not in a nostalgic mood but in showing us the gap'. And this represents the 'deepest and most originally implemented Beckettian technique to be seen outside the stagings of Beckett's own texts'. According to the Polish critic, the biggest surprise in store for us in *Dead Class* is that 'it could be almost entirely derived from Beckett's work [. . .] although the word Beckett is not uttered a single time' (Puzyna 1982, 110–11; my translation).

According to Puzyna, the fundamental strategy of both Beckett and Kantor is to build into the performance the awareness of the past as something lacking in our experience, the awareness of the absent which is more important than the present. But here again, the analysis ends, as was the case with Miłosz, in socio-cultural predictions referring to Poland. It is our mature biography that is lacking, 'there is a hole in our collective memory', Puzyna concludes. In an obvious allusion to the situation in post-war Poland, he writes:

With every year grows disbelief, mistrust, the feeling that we have been duped; disorientation, bitterness, resignation. We have stopped shaping reality [. . .] we mechanically carry out instructions. We think we are helpless, though it is not true. But this we dare not say. We mutter only, unclearly, that everything which we have done and lived through is falsified, illusory, manipulated 'up there'. That it is not so. Thus, slowly, our mature biography dissolves. It becomes as though it were not ours, non-existent, as though it had never existed. (112)

Puzyna, a perceptive critic, projects Beckett's universal vision of time unregained onto the socio-political situation of his *socii malorum* in Poland, a sort of collective amnesia perhaps necessary to remain sane. Once again, literature is seen in terms of its social mission.





VII

In 1957, after nearly two decades of absence from the Polish stage, or presence marked by manipulation, plays from Paris, London, Zurich and Broadway found their way to the banks of the Vistula. And, as Mrożek reminisces, 'back then the theatre was the most important art. Which was due to the collective reaction of the public as well as to the limited censorship' (Mrożek 2006, 213). With *Godot* having cleared the way, *Endgame* was translated for *Dialog* by Rogoziński, almost simultaneously with the appearance of the French original, even before its world première in London. The monthly journal furthermore organized a discussion of leading drama critics, who pronounced the London and Paris openings to be very important events. It concluded with the statement: 'Beckett's plays do make sense, and there is a moral to them: *point de rêveries*'.³ *Endgame* was swiftly staged in Cracow's Teatr 38 by Waldemar Krygier in November 1957, before the first English language production in New York, and by January 1958 the play had reached a wide audience across the country when it was broadcast by Polish Television in Stanislaw Hebanowski's production. *Krapp's Last Tape* was staged with the same promptness, directed in January 1959 by Krygier at Teatr 38, although curiously with a cast of three: Krapp, a girl and a male funeral director.

That said, it must be noted that *Krapp's Last Tape* was not staged a single time during the decade that followed. The entire period, 1962–70, saw no new production of *Godot* or *Endgame*. The Beckett euphoria was quickly hushed by an absence, at least a stage absence, which brings us back to politics and the cyclical nature of cultural freedom. For as stated, every opening of the door was ineluctably followed by a period of restrictions, a 'tightening of the screws'. Even though new productions were neither allowed nor encouraged, the impact of the Warsaw *Godot* of 1957, and the aura around Beckett in general, were such that when *Happy Days* became a success in London and Paris, it was welcomed in Poland with open arms. Its Polish première, in an excellent translation by Mary and Adam Tarn, took place in Lodz in January 1965, directed by Tadeusz Minc. It was staged in Koszalin on the Baltic later that year, but for its truly spectacular success it had to wait until January 1967, when Jerzy Markuszewski produced it at Warsaw's Contemporary Theatre with a set designed by Franciszek Starowieyski. Winnie, played by Halina Mikołajska, impressed the critics and the audience to such a degree that the success of *Happy Days* matched that of *Waiting for Godot* produced 10 years earlier on the same stage. Her performance was still in people's minds when the news broke that Beckett had been awarded the Nobel Prize.

The high point of the first decade of Beckett's Polish reception was undoubtedly the initial success of *Waiting for Godot*, based on the acceptance of its message which, regardless of all its ambiguities, seemed to Warsaw's audiences universally valid and did not spark any ideologically charged debate. It was good that the audience saw themselves in Beckett's plays, and that the play in turn confirmed their truths. Transplanted into a different cultural context, however, Beckett's works, in order to become a vital part of Polish culture, should have been given a fair examination in their own terms. Unless examined in such a way, they do not open new horizons, because there is no need to comprehend them in any other way than that which assures identification. Recent history of Polish culture provides many examples of borrowings which, though they were said to perfectly fit into the Polish context, were never assimilated because their apparent similarity





174 *International Reception of Samuel Beckett*

became an actual obstacle in understanding their proper dimensions. Beckett's fate in Poland was sealed to a considerable degree at the moment of the première of *Waiting for Godot*.

VIII

By 1969, *Dialog* had published Beckett's four major plays, two radio dramas, one mime and his first TV play.⁴ Three *Nouvelles* were published during the initial boom in 1958, but remained the only prose pieces in Polish until 1973, when *First Love*, the text which the author reluctantly agreed to release in the wake of the Nobel Prize, was translated by Maria Ziębina, who also signed four of Beckett's poems in 1972.⁵ After the Nobel Prize, good years ensued again. *Dialog* published his recent plays⁶ as well as *The Lost Ones* (1971); the latter, in a perceptive translation by Krzysztof Wolicki, was presented as a work which grew out of Beckett's theatre.

In 1973, the long-awaited collection of Beckett's plays in book form came out. Entitled *Teatr* (PIW Publishers 1973b), it contained four previously published theatrical works as well as *All That Fall*, *Embers* and *Eh Joe*, and was to serve as a primary reference for the greater public. The afterword was a brilliantly concise essay by Błoński, rich in insights, which to this day makes for fascinating reading. In its six sections, ready to dismiss myths and stereotypes and to patiently explain the basics of Beckett, Błoński unfolds, sometimes in a narrative of convoluted movement, a whole spectrum of Beckettian themes: the role of time, the reduction of space, his attitude towards language, the interaction of the banal and the transcendental (musing on the categories of the tragic, comic and grotesque), his references to Racine, Shakespeare and other classics, the question of humour and irony, specific mechanisms (literary and theatrical) of generating meaning. Błoński also dwells on the open character of Beckett's *oeuvre*: its up to the reader to find (or not) his or her own meaning. In my opinion, this essay is still the best Polish text ever written on the Irish writer.

Dialog continued to publish translations of new plays: *Not I* in 1973, *Footfalls* and *That Time* in 1976, all three by Malgorzata Semil, the latter appearing together with the *Regiebuch* from the Schiller-Theater and Martin Esslin's essay on Beckett's late plays. As to stagings, Cracow's Stary Teatr showed *Happy Days* in 1972 in a double-bill with *Play*, almost concurrently with a TV production by Jerzy Antczak with Ryszarda Hanin, which reached millions of viewers.

Throughout the 1970s, Beckett's plays were favoured by many outstanding actors. Their productions almost guaranteed a theatrical *événement*, and were clear marks of distinction, mastery and maturity of the performers. More often than not, however, their success could not be traced to an accuracy of performance, but their respectful attitude towards the text and the fact that they were based on good translations. The Beckett production which drew the largest crowds was Jerzy Krasowski's *Endgame*, first produced in Wrocław in 1973 and then transferred to Cracow, with a modified cast; 37,000 viewers attended 72 performances. The set did not give the impression of being an interior, nor was it bare. The walls of the shelter were symbolically marked and the stage was littered with many more objects than those required by the stage directions. Hamm spoke and moved with eloquence and facility – in spite of his paralysis – and was played by none other





than the actress Maja Komorowska, the shooting star of Krzysztof Zanussi's and Andrzej Wajda's films.

The decade also marked the re-appearance of Beckett's prose. In 1975, on the eve of his 70th birthday, a group of texts was included in an issue of Warsaw's monthly *Literatura na Świecie* (*World Literature*), featuring excerpts from Beckett's major prose works, beginning with *Murphy*, *Watt*, the French trilogy, then *Fizzles*, *Lessness*, *Se voir*, *From an Abandoned Work*, as well as *Radio 1* and the *Film* scenario, translated by Jacek Gąsiorowski, Maria Chmielewska, Piotr Kamiński, Irena Kowalik, Alojzy Pałasz and Antoni Libera. This was a good start, and a harbinger of things to come, but little more, for the translations of these six individuals varied significantly in quality (the most questionable being those by Kowalik who, for example, rendered 'conarium' as 'masculinity' in the excerpt from *Murphy*, translated from the French!). The issue also contained a longer critical text by Martin Esslin, testimonies by Jérôme Lindon, Harold Pinter, Madeleine Renaud and Alan Schneider, a few notes by Alojzy Pałasz and an essay on *Ping* by Libera, which gave a touch of originality to the whole enterprise. The issue was compiled by Antoni Libera (1949–), then a doctoral student who had joined the circle of Beckett *aficionados* in Poland.

Libera discovered Beckett as a student, and has zealously pursued that path ever since. As early as 1972, prior to the publication of *Literatura na Świecie*, the Warsaw literary monthly *Twórczość* (*Creation*), which had occasionally reported about Beckett in its *Cronicle* column and published Jerzy Lisowski's translation of *Lessness* (1970b no.7–8), presented in its issue no.5 four excerpts from Beckett's recent prose: *How It Is* and *Ping*, translated by Libera, *Imagination Dead Imagine* by Kowalik and the opening of *The Lost Ones*, freshly published (in Paris) in a joint translation by both. The excerpts were accompanied by Libera's article on the development of Beckett's prose with emphasis on the most recent texts in French, at the time a very useful introduction to that part of Beckett's output, which was still very little known in Poland.⁷

Libera eventually contacted Beckett, who was sympathetic to his undertakings, and so began a fascinating friendship, conducted mostly by letter, which was to last many years and bear invaluable fruits for the translator and critic. Beckett's letters contained many important remarks and interesting details, which help us better understand the intentions of the writer, otherwise so taciturn when it came to elucidating his work. Libera on his part contributed to correcting a few of the author's mistaken computations in the arithmetical passages of his late prose.

The 1970s witnessed a growing awareness of the inadequacy of most of the Polish translations, notably the one of *Krapp's Last Tape*, but also all the major plays rendered by Julian Rogoziński, otherwise a competent translator of French literature, including Balzac. They had served well in the late fifties but were becoming visibly obsolete. Rogoziński, while doing well to render the natural colloquialism of Beckett's drama, did not take into account the elaborate patterns at work in the original texts and the eccentricities, which are not devoid of meaning. As a result, Libera began re-translating some of the stage works available in Polish, along with translating the new drama.





176 *International Reception of Samuel Beckett*

IX

Samuel Beckett's 75th birthday was a good opportunity to bring out another issue of *Literatura na Świecie* (4/1981a), which featured the hitherto untranslated part of the author's dramatic work and 'neither' The 13 texts were translated by Libera, Kamiński and Gąsiorowski, and were followed by criticism by James Knowlson (on *Footfalls*) and a chapter on *Not I* from Deirdre Bair's biography, a text on *A Piece of Monologue* and a *compte rendu* of recent academic research (Libera), brief articles on the *Journal of Beckett Studies* (Krystyna Włakowicz) and on staging Beckett in Poland (Michał Mrozowicki). The long introductory essay *Samuel Beckett: A Retrospect*, written by Marek Kędzierski, reconstructed a portrait of the artist through his works and critics.

Kędzierski was Beckett's other 'Polish contact' throughout the eighties. Like Libera, he started with criticism, then translated Beckett's texts, finally directing them in the theatre. His first articles on the Irish writer appeared in the academic journals *Teksty*, *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, the monthly *Poezja* and the weekly *Literatura*. In 1981, Kędzierski helped Ewa Jankowska and Antoni Libera to translate 'Dante and the Lobster', which was published in *Twórczość* (1981b) with a commentary by Kędzierski. *Dialog* also brought out his article entitled *Beckett-Plays-The End*.⁸

As with Libera, the Irish author took a personal interest in Kędzierski and was very helpful, allowing him to attend his rehearsals in London and Stuttgart and giving him advice about how to arrange radiophonic versions of the prose works *Company* and *Watt*, both broadcast in Germany and presented at a sort of *Beckett on the air* festival, a series of broadcasts accompanied by Kędzierski's radio essays in 1990 and 2006.

During his first meeting with Beckett in 1980, Kędzierski extended to the author an invitation to direct one of his plays at Cracow's renowned Stary (Old) Theatre, only to hear his reply: 'I am too old and I don't know Polish, but Walter will do it much better than I'. So in September 1981 Walter D. Asmus, who had collaborated with Beckett on several occasions, arrived in Cracow to direct *Endgame*. Kędzierski re-translated the text, to which Beckett contributed with several remarkable suggestions, then worked as Asmus' assistant. Throughout the play, Wiktor Sadeck's monstrously unpredictable Hamm mercilessly nailed down the remaining cast, in a set designed by Jerzy Grzegorzewski. Nagg and Nell's ashbins had been made at the theatre workshop for Roger Blin's tour in Poland back in 1970.⁹

Endgame became the play to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the National Stage in Cracow. But the months before the crackdown on the Solidarity movement was a time of worsening of the social climate in Poland. The government, in its effort to show that freedom would mean anarchy and a declining economy, reduced the supplies of basic goods on the market. There was no lack of shortages throughout the entire communist era, but 1981 was easily the worst year. So when, in Asmus' production, Clov spoke his refrain 'There are no more . . .', something the Poles heard in almost every shop in those days, the audience broke out in loud laughter.¹⁰ Thus once again the political situation made people dramatically aware of the down-to-earth universality of Beckett's message.





X

When a few weeks after the opening of *Endgame* in Cracow martial law was declared by General Jaruzelski, Kędzierski was in the West but Libera, having returned from Ohio, New York and Paris, remained in Warsaw. Beckett sent him parcels and generously transferred to him the money from previously uncollected royalties for all the productions staged in Poland. This money was partly used for financing clandestine Solidarity activities. In 1957, 'Waiting for Godot' was interpreted as waiting in vain for true socialism. In 1981, Clov's 'there is no more . . .' became an allusion to the empty shops. In 1986, 3 years before the final victory of the Solidarity movement, the v sign of the hand of the defiant silent protagonist of *Catastrophe*, in a production staged by Libera at Warsaw's Studio Theatre, gave a clearly political edge to the otherwise poetic image of Beckett.

The 1980s was the decade of the final decline of the communist system; the regime was sending contradictory signals: busy with strict police control of street protests, it allowed the gradual phasing out of censorship. It could be argued that Beckett productions and translations, if they did not contribute to, at least coincided with the advancement of the democratic cause.

The dreary years of 1982–83, with Poland under martial law, saw the publication of four Beckett books: the long-awaited and necessary volume of Beckett's late prose, translated by Antoni Libera and Piotr Kamiński, a translation of *Molloy* by Maria Leśniewska (which passed virtually unnoticed by the reviewers), the first book of criticism in Polish on Beckett, co-authored by Jan Błoński and Marek Kędzierski, and another on Beckett's prose by Wojciech Kalaga, published in English by the University of Silesia Press (1982). Throughout 1983, translations appeared in periodicals, including *Company* in *Twórczość* (4/1982b), Beckett's own critical texts in *Dialog*, and *Proust* (1983c) and *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (1983e), the former translated by Libera alone, the latter with Elżbieta Jasińska.

The concise monograph *Samuel Beckett* (Czytelnik Publishers; 1982) by Błoński and Kędzierski featured essays by both authors, followed by excerpts from Beckett's criticism from 1934 to 1981, a short chapter 'Beckett on Beckett', biblio- and biographical sections and 16 pages of photographs. Błoński's essay, a revised and enlarged (to include prose) version of his former text of 1973, departs from the main characteristics of Beckett's *écriture* and his literary strategies *sensu largo*, and gives examples from the texts. Kędzierski goes the other way; he takes specific passages from *Endgame* as a point of departure, and derives, from close analysis, conclusions regarding Beckett's way of producing literary meaning.

The volume of Beckett's *Prose* (*Pisma prozą*, published by Czytelnik in 1982a) contained *From an Abandoned Work*, *Fizzles*, *Enough*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *The Lost Ones*, *Ping*, *Lessness*, *For to End Yet Again*, and *Still*, translated by Antoni Libera and Piotr Kamiński; all in all 88 pages of translations followed by Libera's 100-page commentary in smaller print, which offers both matter-of-fact information on Beckett's texts and interpretation, at times of a highly speculative nature. Combining the two in a volume which is the first presentation of Beckett's prose in book form may disorient the reader, by suggesting that the interpretation is in some way 'endorsed' by the author. While Libera's commentary abounds in interesting observations and original insights, its very title *Beckett's Cosmology* invites the reader to place the Irish writer in the religious realm more than he himself ever wanted, claimed or saw fit.





178 *International Reception of Samuel Beckett*

Although *Dialog* kept publishing new works by Beckett in translations by Malgorzata Semil, Libera's own translations in the 1980s gradually superseded those by other translators.¹¹ In 1985, his *Waiting for Godot* came out in Warsaw and 3 years later opened *Dramatic Works* (PIW Publishers), an impressive volume of Samuel Beckett's collected plays for stage, TV and radio – 31 texts filling 750 pages. As in Libera's edition of Beckett's prose of 1982, this publication is also followed by his extensive commentary. Fifteen plays were selected in 1995 for another volume titled *Dramaty (Drama 1995a)*, published in the series of Biblioteka Narodowa (National Library), which provides valuable editions of the classics, a status Samuel Beckett finally acquired in Poland.

The 1980s was also the period of Libera's major successes as a theatre director. He started staging Beckett in 1980 with the Poznan production of *Not I* and *That Time*, performed in a triple bill with a *Krapp* directed by Gasiorowski, and by the end of the decade managed to win for his directorial work a group of major Polish actors, including the formidable Tadeusz Łomnicki. Łomnicki starred in *Play* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, first staged in March 1985 at Warsaw's Teatr Studio (where in 1986 he also played Hamm in a production of *Endgame*) and later shown on tour throughout Europe.¹² A similar success was enjoyed by Libera's production of *Happy Days*, which opened 10 years later at Warsaw's Dramatic Theatre (Teatr Dramatyczny) with Maja Komorowska. Although the actress enjoyed a brilliant career with many high points, she surpassed herself in *Happy Days*. In popular opinion, Łomnicki and Komorowska brought Beckett in Poland to heights formerly achieved by Tadeusz Fijewski and Halina Mikołajska in 1957 and 1967. Libera's stagings fully deserved the critical acclaim they received.

In comparison, his productions for Polish television (1988–92), though featuring well-known actors, were rather an exercise in duplicating Beckett's own work. This was particularly the case with *What Where*, a technically awkward enterprise lacking the subtleties of the Stuttgart original. Here, the heads appear to come out of cut-outs used to frame faces in posed images of social events in the golden age of photography. The director's only original contribution is rather questionable echoing effects, a device all too easily applied by novices in radio art.

In 1989, the year of Beckett's death and the year that also marked the end of communism in Poland, Libera directed David Warrilow as *Krapp* in a production which opened at London's Haymarket Theatre. Two years later, he was invited to stage *Endgame* in Dublin as a part of the Beckett Festival at the Gate Theatre, with the invaluable Barry McGovern and Alan Stanford. Although not strictly speaking part of Beckett's reception in Poland, these productions deserve mention here.

As a director, Antoni Libera was precise and faithful to the letter, and sensitive to the music of the text. He produced the plays the way he knew the author wanted them to be staged, drawing on published material and his correspondence with Beckett. With this blueprint in mind he still had to confront the actors in rehearsal. It was easier with Warrilow or McGovern, who had the same model in mind. But he had to display more *souplesse* with Łomnicki, for example, an actor who could not quite dispense with stage naturalism. This luckily proved to be an advantage, for his departures from the proscribed pattern gave a touch of genius to Łomnicki's performance. However, accomplished as these productions were, they can be considered neither definitive nor 'authorized', contrary to what certain reviews have suggested. Beckett has emphasized on numerous occasions that his





stage solutions are not rigid recipes, but the result of many factors related to a particular production.

As a translator, Libera has set new standards of accuracy. It is good that the whole body of Beckett's work has been rendered by one person, as it secures the unity of the writer's vocabulary and style. Leaving aside questions of style, precision and linguistic accuracy vary from one of Libera's translations to another; strangely enough, it is in Beckett's own criticism that we find the more spectacular pratfalls.¹³ Also, a careful comparison of originals and his translations shows the tendency on Libera's part to render Beckett's texts more comprehensible than they themselves are. This may or may not have to do with the fact that Libera assumes the role of both translator and commentator. And the passion of the exegete may be at conflict with the duty of the translator, the latter being to enable the reader to perceive the translated work in a semantic context as wide as that of the original. Libera's interpretations are preceded by a detailed analysis of the text. Any interpretative conclusion of the general kind is tantamount to a jump into the realm of metaphysics, which doesn't necessarily appear to contradict Beckett's literary strategy. The point of disagreement, however, is that all too often Libera is convinced of the possibility and necessity of extracting one specific interpretation of any given work, a procedure clearly at odds with what the Irish author has always professed.¹⁴

XI

The news of Samuel Beckett's burial was aired by the media on the same day as the pictures of the executed Romanian dictator Ceausescu. Within a few months, the communist system collapsed in most of the East European countries. As to Beckett's reception in Poland, that period closed with an impressive active balance: between 1956 and 1989 a bulk of his work was firmly implanted in the cultural landscape of the country, albeit not without political strings attached. Henceforth, Beckett's work, freed from ideological resonance, was to speak for itself and to be received in a more normal fashion. There was, however, some advantage to the otherwise reductive politicizing of the apolitical writer, as there were disadvantages brought on by the new social developments. If during the communist period culture was infringed upon and heavily manipulated, its impact was at times astoundingly huge. Culture and theatre enjoyed a privileged status which has since disappeared; now it is not the censor but 'market forces' that pose a threat to culture. It used to be difficult to write openly, and publishing books was a lengthy business, and often the material results were rather unsatisfying. There is no censorship any more, and the book market has become infinitely more diversified, but high culture has been all too often pushed aside by the noisy popular kind. In 1982, when paper was in short supply, a book of criticism on Beckett came out in an edition of 20,000 copies. Today, a novel by Beckett rarely reaches 2000 copies.

The first extensive critical study on Beckett was published in Poland in 1990. Written in the mid-1980s, its text waited almost 5 years before it was published (updated in the meantime), unwillingly witnessing the transformation from a socialist to an early capitalist economy. Entitled *Samuel Beckett*, Marek Kędzierski's 400-page monograph opens with a 120-page chapter in which the author, going





180 *International Reception of Samuel Beckett*

step by step through the six decades of Beckett's writing, attempts to describe the main preoccupations and the prevalent style in subsequent periods and to characterize the nature of the Beckettian literary evolution. Each of the 12 remaining chapters focuses on a major work or a group of texts, discussed in detail, from Beckett's early critical writings on Joyce and Proust through to the poetry, the unpublished *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, the published prose in English and French, ending with *Waiting for Godot*. Since so few of Beckett's early texts were available in Polish, the author's intention was to dwell on each major work so as to give the reader a more precise idea of its nature, including numerous *compte rendus* of the plots and voluminous quotations. The fruit of a decade of personal research, Kędzierski's book drew from unpublished and published foreign sources which helped rectify some prevalent errors and misconceptions. The corrected chronology was partly provided by the subject of the monograph himself.

Kędzierski's study came out with the goal of making up for the shortcomings of university criticism on Beckett in Poland. At the time almost non-existent, it could boast merely a few articles published at university presses, and a few books, difficult to obtain, among them that of Wojciech Kalaga in English and that of Michał Mrozowiecki in French.

In the domain of prose, Beckett's two major novels were translated by Marek Kędzierski, *Watt* in 1993 and *Malone Dies* in 1997. *Watt* was then presented on stage in Cracow and on radio in Berlin. The theatre version was the first of a series of Beckett productions Kędzierski directed in Cracow: *Watt* in 1994, *Endgame* in 1995, *Play* and *Not I* in 1997 (in a four-play bill with Walter Asmus' *Come and Go* and Oliver Sturm's theatre version of *Quad*), *Krapp's Last Tape* in 2003¹⁵ at Teatr Bücklein and Teatr Atelier, with a group of actors from Sary Teatr, notably Marek Kalita, Janusz Koprowski and Piotr Skiba, and then *Happy Days* with Alicia Bieniewicz at Sary Teatr in 2002. For all these productions Kędzierski provided his own translations.

As director of international theatre festivals, Kędzierski presented in Cracow 'leaner' versions of programmes he had prepared for Berlin (2000) and Zurich (2006) at the festivals *transpositions 2002* and *transposition 2006*. The latter, held at Łażnia Nowa Theatre, located in Cracow's industrial suburbs Nowa Huta, was an offshoot of *Die lange Nacht von Samuel Beckett*, organized a few weeks earlier at Schauspielhaus Zurich, with the same prominent artists Rick Cluchey, Martin Wuttke and Conor Lovett. The two other big names of the Zurich event, Serge Merlin and Giulia Lazzarini, and their Beckett shows, *The Lost Ones* and *Happy Days* (directed by Giorgio Strehler of Piccolo Teatro di Milano), became high points of another Beckett festival in Cracow, *Dedykacje (Dedications)*, held in late 2006 in elegant venues of the city's historical centre. Lazzarini added to her bravura performance, already characteristic for the original production of 1982, when she was in her fifties, an incredibly intense emotional touch, due, no doubt, to her illness and grief over the loss of her husband Carlo Battistoni who, after Strehler's death, had revived the production in 1998. The festival also featured a *Godot* production from Vilnius, and *May B* by Compagnie Maguy Marin. Thus Cracow, hosting two festivals in the centenary year, could truly boast the best of Beckett on an international scale.

Among events accompanying the Festival *Dedykacje*, which included a university conference and a gala evening of Franz Schubert at Cracow's opera house,





Beckett's Reception in Poland 181

mention should be made of an interesting acting experiment, a triple-bill of *Theatre 2*, *Footfalls* and *A Piece of Monologue* assembled under the title *He was born and thereby lost* (*Birth was the death of him* in Libera's rendition). In these pieces the organizer of the festival, J. Opalski, the director Antoni Libera as well as Cracow's well-known poet B. Maj turned into *les comédiens* themselves, Opalski and Maj as eloquent performers in *Theatre 2*, Libera as Speaker in *A Piece of Monologue*.

XII

Since the early 1990s, Libera and Kędzierski have published numerous materials related to Beckett in the newly founded magazine *Kwartalnik Artystyczny*, whose editor-in-chief Krzysztof Myszkowski was himself a Beckett enthusiast and the author of two novels not without thematic and stylistic affinities with the work of the Irish writer. The magazine, 'the home' of two Nobel prize-winning authors, Czesław Miłosz and Wisława Szymborska, known for its special issues on art (Giacometti, Bacon) and literature (Pinter, Bernhard, Pinget and the authors of Editions de Minuit and Suhrkamp Verlag), have published to date four numbers devoted to Beckett (all edited by Kędzierski). The first (1996) features translations of excerpts from the prose including *Molloy* (Libera) and *Ill Seen Ill Said* (Kędzierski), critical texts by Gilles Deleuze, Jonathan Kalb, Reiner Müller-Freienfels, Andrzej Stasiuk, Krzysztof Myszkowski, Antoni Libera and Marek Kędzierski. Most of the photographs were provided by Hugo Jehle, who had assisted the TV productions in Stuttgart. The issue also contains excerpts from testimonies on the Irish writer by, among others, Vaclav Havel, Jérôme Lindon, Edward Beckett, David Warrilow, Billie Whitelaw and Martin Esslin. The second Beckett issue of *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* (1999) highlights the Irish author's breakthrough in the late forties, with the *French Trilogy* at its centre. Apart from the long closing passage of *The Unnamable*, it features critical texts related to the topic by Kędzierski and Thomas Hunkeler, and a chapter from Anthony Cronin's biography.

Beckettian accents are also to be found in the Editions de Minuit issue of *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* (2000), in which a passage from *Mercier and Camier* was published together with a long transcript of Marek Kędzierski's conversations with Jérôme Lindon. Shortly before his death, the French publisher mused with unprecedented ease and warmth on his long *rapport* with Beckett, which began when he read the manuscript of *Molloy* in 1948.¹⁶

To commemorate Beckett's centenary in 2006, *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* published two special issues, totalling 400 pages of materials. The first (issue 3–4; 2006), offers, among others, unpublished commemorative texts by Rick Cluchey and Barney Rosset, and Kędzierski's long conversation with Barbara Bray, who is currently working on a book on Samuel Beckett in the vein of Norman Malcolm's *Memoir* of Ludwig Wittgenstein. She reminisces on her working and personal relationship with Beckett, and throws in many interesting details concerning, for example, the genesis of *Play*, *Catastrophe* and 'What is the Word'. The 'binary articles' of the type 'Beckett and . . .' include texts on Beckett and Dante (J.P. Ferrini), Shakespeare (N. Berlin) Różewicz (J. Kornhauser) and Miłosz (K. Myszkowski). John Fletcher and Anna McMullan present an academic view on Beckett's drama, while Lütfi Özkök, a Turkish poet and photographer from Stockholm, signs 15 full-size photographs of Beckett in the 1960s. Antoni Libera contributes to the issue with





182 International Reception of Samuel Beckett

his memoir of staging a student production in 1969. The second commemorative issue (1/2007) focuses on Beckett in Germany and features texts on the young writer's trip to the Third Reich in 1936–37 and on his work in post-war Germany. Among the authors are Walter Asmus, Hans Hiebel, Mark Nixon, Roswitha Quadflieg (who in 2005 published the limited edition of the Hamburg chapter of Beckett's 'German diaries') and Marek Kędzierski. Both anniversary issues feature a conversation between Krzysztof Myszkowski and Marek Kędzierski entitled *Beckett's Trap, which is to be continued* in the next Beckett issue in late 2008.

XIII

Apart from the already mentioned collection of plays from 1995,¹⁷ *Watt* and *Malone Dies* (trans. Kędzierski), the translations of the last two decades include the book *Molloy and Four Novellas* (trans. Libera; 2004)¹⁸ and Beckett's early novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, published in 2003 under the title *Sen o kobietach pięknych i takich sobie* ('Dream of Beautiful and Fair to Middling Women'). The latter, jointly translated by Barbara Kopeć-Umiastowska and Stanisław Magala, is quite a good and inventive rendition which reads well in Polish and pulsates with the energy typical for young Beckett. This impressive undertaking, given the difficulty of translating such a text, is a rare bird in the country's literary landscape. Unfortunately, in spite of good reviews, it provoked little or no interest.

Libera's volume *Faithfulness to Failure: Essays* (1999) is made up of Beckett's previously translated criticism (texts on Joyce, Proust and *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*) and his post-war art criticism, translated in collaboration with Marcin Nowoszewski.

Libera's *Beckett's Blessing and Other Literary Confessions* (2004), a motley collection of articles, sketches, reviews and conversations (including a fierce polemic against General Jaruzelski, who had been deposed 15 years earlier), opens with a personal memoir, or rather a confession of the translator's *rendez-vous* with Beckett in April 1986, when the Nobel Prize laureate conferred upon him his blessing and anointed him as a younger colleague. Indeed, a decade later Antoni Libera produced his own novel *Madame*, which became an international best-seller: 'I have no doubt today that to a great degree I owe the success of *Madame* to Beckett's blessing and to his spirit which watched over all'. In his opinion, Beckett being a *non plus ultra*, the fate of lesser geniuses is not to follow his path of literary experimentation but to choose a more conventional style.

In recent years, academic criticism in Poland has timidly begun to show more interest in Beckett. The period 1990 until the middle of the present decade has seen a fair amount of translated articles, but no books have been published,¹⁹ not even any of the three existing biographies. In terms of domestic criticism, however, a considerable number of articles and one book, Tomasz Wiśniewski's *Kształt literacki dramatu Samuela Becketta* (*The Literary Shape of Samuel Beckett's Drama*; 2006), have appeared.²⁰ Wiśniewski became the guest editor of a Beckett issue of the bimonthly *Topos* (6/2006), featuring 82 pages of contributions by J.M. Coetzee, James Knowlson, Stanley E. Gontarski, Edward Albee, Paul Auster, Antoni Libera, a longer text on Beckett's poetry by Wiśniewski and miscellanea. The young scholar organized a Beckett conference at the University of Olsztyn in





2008. These are reassuring signs of Beckett's continuous presence as an academic subject, with new doctoral dissertations steadily being produced.

Apart from academic circles, critics who have published texts on Beckett in literary journals and magazines include Andrzej Falkiewicz, Andrzej Kijowski, Henryk Bereza, and the former editor-in-chief of *Literatura na Swiecie*, Waclaw Sadkowski. Magazines traditionally interested in Beckett are *Puls*, *Odra*, *Teatr* and *Didaskalia*.

With regard to Polish productions since 1989, there have been a multitude of stagings throughout the country: mainstream, alternative, student, orthodox and experimental, stationary and touring. The first category was for most part the domain of Antoni Libera, who continued to produce Beckett in Warsaw: *Happy Days* in 1995 and *Endgame* in 1997 at Dramatyczny (Dramatic Theatre). He also directed at least three versions of *Godot*: at Mały (Little Theatre) in 1991 (with a cast of Poland's best all-comedian quartet, which sadly backfired) and two more successful productions at Dramatyczny for Beckett's ninetieth anniversary and at Teatr Narodowy (National Theatre) for his centenary. In 2004, for the fiftieth anniversary of the stage debut of the famous actor Zbigniew Zapasiewicz, Libera prepared a triple-bill of *Ohio Impromptu*, *Catastrophe* and *Krapp's Last Tape* entitled 'Zapasiewicz gra Becketta' ('Zapasiewicz plays Beckett') at Powszechny Theatre, which met with great acclaim from both press and audiences.

There have been a variety of productions outside of the mainstream. To give just a few examples: Lesław and Waclaw Janicki, the twin brothers immortalized by the late Tadeusz Kantor, presented *Acts without Words* and *Krapp's Last Tape* in their show *Beckettiana*.²¹ In 1999, an interesting experiment by Piotr Szczerski of Żeromski Theatre in Kielce involved 11 plays shown simultaneously in various spaces of the building. Even though the quality of the productions was not mind-boggling, there was something very Beckettian about the energy running through the labyrinth of darkened spaces. Younger artists have tried to experiment with Beckett in 'a different genre', for example in a production which opened in 2006 in Poznań's Old Brewery Cultural Centre under the English title *Flow*, an evening of dance inspired by *Waiting for Godot*, and Beckett's radio play *Cascando* presented as a piece of music at the Music Academy in the same city in 2002.

Of the more recent stagings by directors who do not claim to be Beckett specialists, M. Sobociński produced *Endgame* in 2006 at Cracow's Bagatela Theatre (shown during the festival *Dedykacje*), unfortunately without Nagg and Nell and with Clov pushing Hamm on a swing over a sand-covered stage. In Piotr Cieplak's production of *Happy Days* at Warsaw's Polonia Theatre in 2007, the director took the liberty of dispensing with the mound and placed Winnie on a chair covered with a sort of large blanket or quilt, first up to her waist then to her neck. Unlike *Endgame* at Bagatela, this production was taken seriously by critics. The outstanding stage and film actress Krystyna Janda, known for her film roles in, among others, Wajda's *Man of Iron*, played Winnie as a paralyzed woman in a hotel room, facing death in the company of Willie. For Cieplak, as one reviewer stated, 'she is not a theatrical symbol of the absurdity of the human condition but an ordinary, ill woman endowed with an uncanny intuition' (Kopciński 2007).

In recent years Beckett's *oeuvre* has continued to be a mine for exploration and re-discovery for younger directors and actors, who somewhat timidly eye the orthodoxy of the prescribed Beckett, for many mistakenly perceived as the





184 International Reception of Samuel Beckett

domain of the explained and the codified. Unfortunately, the work of the Irish writer has so far failed to attract the creative attention of Poland's most notable directors today: Krystian Lupa, Krzysztof Warlikowski or Grzegorz Jarzyna. This may change. Lupa, the internationally best-known Polish director, who has produced and guest performed Dostoevsky, Rilke, Broch, Bulgakov and Thomas Bernhard all over Europe, is going to stage his first Beckett in 2009.

Notes

- 1 Much later, Miłosz reiterated: 'As you know, I highly value Beckett and find enough of him in myself to fight it tooth and nail' (letter to Krzysztof Myszkowski, 8 August 1993).
- 2 The Job parallel is also to be found in Ionesco's *Lorsque j'écris*, in 'Cahiers des Saison', Paris (1959).
- 3 'Rozmowy o dramacie. Nowa sztuka Becketta', in *Dialog* 6 (1957).
- 4 *Czekając na Godota* (*Waiting for Godot*), trans. Rogoziński (1956); *Końcówka, Akt bez słów I* (*Endgame and Act without Words I*), trans. Julian Rogoziński (1957a); *Którzy upadają* (*All That Fall*), trans. Krzysztof Zarzecki (1957b); *Ostatnia taśma Krappa* (*Krapp's Last Tape*), trans. Krystyna Cękalska and Kazimierz Błahij (1958); *Popioły* (*Embers*), trans. Cecylia Wojewoda (1959); *Radosne dni* (*Happy Days*), trans. Mary and Adam Tarnowie (1961); *Sluchaj, Joe* (*Eh Joe*), trans. Julian Rogoziński (1966).
- 5 In Cracow's weekly *Zycie Literackie* 31 (1972).
- 6 *Komedia* (*Play*), trans. Julian Rogoziński and Małgorzata Semil (1970a); *Nie ja* (*Not I*), trans. Małgorzata Semil (1973a); *Fragment dramatyczny* (*Theatre 1*), trans. Jacek Gąsiorowski (1976a); *Kroki* and *Wtedy* (*Footfalls* and *That Time*), trans. Małgorzata Semil (1976b).
- 7 Later elaborated in the article *Kosmologia Becketta* (*Beckett's Cosmology*); see Libera 1976.
- 8 This essay, entitled *Skirmishes over Beckett*, discussed the sad state of university research on Beckett in Poland; see Kędzierski 1981.
- 9 Roger Blin presented *Endgame* at Stary in 1970 while on a tour of Poland, the curious description of which can be found in his *Memoirs*, published in 1992.
- 10 During the early months of martial law, Asmus organized among the actors and employees of the City Theatre in Cologne a collection of donations for Stary, which amounted to a truckload of food and clothing. Since entry was routinely denied to anyone involved in culture, Asmus applied for a Polish visa as a driver and shared the wheel of the huge lorry of gifts with an actor's friend on an adventurous ride along deserted icy roads patrolled by army outposts.
- 11 *Impromptu 'Ohio'* (*Ohio impromptu*), *Kolysanka* (*Rockaby*) and *Katastrofa* (*Catastrophe*) in 1983(a, b, d); *Co gdzie* (*What Where*) in 1984; *Partia solowa* (*A Piece of Monologue*) and *Nacht und Träume* in 1986(a, b); and *Słowa i muzyka* (*Word and Music*) in 1987.
- 12 Polish television broadcast Libera's *Krapp's Last Tape* in 1989.
- 13 Such as the famous long sentence of the first of the *Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, where 'together with the obligation to express' is rendered as 'nor the obligation to express', thereby neutralizing one of Beckett's carefully built-up antinomies and robbing the sentence of all its tension.
- 14 A few examples serve to illustrate this point, beginning with Libera's remarks in the volume of Beckett's prose: 'In the language of *From an Abandoned Work*, "to be born" does not mean "coming into the world" but "the origin of mankind itself"'. Or: *The Lost Ones* is 'a poetic expression of the famous thesis that all human activities serve to turning to reality the goals quite different from those which motivate those activities, namely to achieve the higher goals, the goals of Divine Providence. By Divine Providence I mean our willingness to undergo transformation from one form of existence to another'. And an example from the volume of drama: 'The protagonist of *Not I*, as [the





Beckett's Reception in Poland 185

- protagonists] in most of his plays [. . .] is not a ordinary human personality [. . .] but a symbolic figure which symbolizes the whole of mankind. Hence, all her attributes as well as the circumstances of her life *must be* interpreted as metaphors illustrating various aspects of nature and Man's situation. Read this way, every Human Being is a "preemie" and a "foundling" (pp. 113–16; my emphasis). Such interpretations are legitimate; however, they do show a certain bias when combined with the matter-of-fact information accompanying Beckett's own texts.
- 15 This was an experiment of presenting the young Krapp in the process of recording what the old Krapp listens to in a normal production.
 - 16 Excerpts from the same conversations were broadcast in German by Berlin's Deutschland Radio in 2002.
 - 17 A further collection, *Dramaty*, was published in 2002 in the series *Canon for the end of the century* (*Kanon na koniec wieku*).
 - 18 A rather ill-fated volume of translations of Beckett's *nouvelles* was *Nowele. Teksty po nic* ('Texts for Nothing', and the three novellas), trans. M. Rochowicz-Caillarec, W. Szydłowska, and J. Zbierska-Mościcka (1995b).
 - 19 There have, however, been chapters on Beckett in books of criticism, for example Adorno's essay on *Endgame* in the volume of his writings: *Sztuka i sztuki* (1990).
 - 20 There have also been publications in the guise of a school edition of *Waiting for Godot*.
 - 21 This production opened in 1992 at Teatro Vascello in Rome and was shown in Poland until 1996.

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186 *International Reception of Samuel Beckett*

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