

# **THE SEMIOTICS OF BECKETT'S THEATRE**

A Semiotic Study of the  
Complete Dramatic Works  
of Samuel Beckett



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A Semiotic Study of the Complete Dramatic  
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# Contents

<b>Preface and Acknowledgements</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1. The Systemic Level: Theatre as a Sign-System</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>1.1. The Actor's Action as a Sign</b>	<b>36</b>
1.1.1. Linguistic Signs	37
1.1.2. Paralinguistic Signs	45
1.1.3. Kinesic Signs	52
1.1.3.1. Facial Expression	55
1.1.3.2. Gestural Signs	63
1.1.3.3. Proxemic Signs	72
<b>1.2. The Actor's Appearance as a Sign</b>	<b>78</b>
1.2.1. Costume	81
1.2.2. Make-up and Hairstyle	85
<b>1.3. Spacial and Acoustic Signs</b>	<b>88</b>
1.3.1. Stage Decoration and Props	89
1.3.2. Lighting	95
1.3.3. Music	100
<b>2. The Epistemic Level: Theatre as a Locus of Philosophical Semiosis</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>2.1. The Language Problematic by Way of Beckett</b>	<b>114</b>
2.1.1. Language and Representation	116
2.1.2. Language Games and the Evasion of Reference	131
2.1.3. Language and Silence	141
<b>2.2. Ontological Semiosis in Beckett's Theatre</b>	<b>153</b>
2.2.1. <i>Dasein</i> or Being-in-the-World	157
2.2.2. <i>Angst</i> and the Signs of Decay	166
2.2.3. The <i>Pour Soi</i> and the Entropy of Consciousness	176
<b>2.3. Time Semiosis in Beckett's Theatre</b>	<b>186</b>
2.3.1. Theorizing Time	186

2.3.2. Time in Beckett's Theatre	190
<b>3. The Code Level: Theatre as a Multi-Coded Expression</b>	<b>205</b>
<b>3.1. The Mythological Code</b>	<b>209</b>
3.1.1. Archetypes and Symbols as Signs in Beckett's Theatre	214
3.1.2. Beckett's Character: the Storyteller-Mythic Wanderer	223
3.1.3. Ritual as Transvaluative Semiosis	229
<b>3.2. The Psychological Code</b>	<b>236</b>
3.2.1. The Fragmented Ego and The Crisis of Subjectivity	244
3.2.2. Language, Desire, and the Voicing of the Unconscious	253
3.2.3. Beckett's Audience and Psychology	262
<b>3.3. The Socio-Historical Code</b>	<b>269</b>
3.3.1. The Logic of Commodity in Beckett's Plays	277
3.3.2. Gender and Social Hierarchy	287
3.3.3. Power Relations: Proxemics and Modality	294
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>305</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>311</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>321</b>

# INTRODUCTION

Over the past hundred years or so, the foundations of human thought have been considerably shaken as the sovereignty and value of such concepts as truth, presence, meaning, reason, critique, and representation have come to be radically questioned. Nietzsche's attack on western metaphysics, Wittgenstein's reconsideration of the relationship between language and the world, Saussure's redefinition of language, Heidegger's revolutionary account of time, Peirce's hypothesis of infinite semiosis, Derrida's subversion of the logocentric order of meaning, etc. have no doubt had a veritable influence on today's polemics with respect to what we commonly know as the humanities. In the field of literary criticism, for example, the thoughts of these theoreticians or philosophers and the vocabulary they employed have remarkably pervaded today's critical discourses and debates about literature, and have had, among other influences, resounding echoes in the application of such theories as formalism, structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction and other critical concepts to the literary text.

Like any other mode of cultural expression, however specific they might be, theatre and drama have scarcely been immune to the explosive dissemination of theories the last three decades have witnessed. They have, in no small way, been subject to generous examination and study by various critics and observers, each trying to fit their different forms of articulation into his/her own critical enterprise. What probably distinguishes contemporary theorizing about theatre and drama is the rise of *theatre semiotics*, which came as a logical outcome of a persistent and thoroughgoing investment in the concept of the *sign* by thinkers and theoreticians like Thomas Sebeok (general editor of *Advances in Semiotics*), Umberto Eco, Julia Kristeva, Marco De Marinis, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Patrice Pavis, and a number of Slovak semioticians like Peter Bogatyrev and Jindrich Honzl whose insights and findings retain a high degree of validity to the present-day preoccupation with theatre.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter Bogatyrev and Jindrich Honzl in Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunic, eds., *Semiotics of Art* (1976; Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 33-56 and 74-93.

## *The Semiotics of Beckett's Theatre*

In fact, the rise of theatre semiotics during the 1980s and after went hand in hand with the progressive conversion into theory in recent literary criticism. But while some of the contemporary theories were received with a certain sense of circumspection – due to their magnified abstraction and excessive concern with textuality – or even distrust<sup>2</sup> as Newton observes, theatre semiotics has not experienced the same fate. This is due to at least two reasons: first, theatre remains a field of interest that is not necessarily accessible to all types of readers; second, theatre semiotics involves more than the study of verbal signs and therefore does not, per force, submit to the same criteria of evaluation as those adopted in the assessment of textually-based approaches.

Even then, the question of the gap between theory and practice has not been resolved. Among the following studies in the field of drama, only the last one has the status of a proper application of the theory of semiotics to theatre: *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (Keir Elam, 1980), *The Semiotics of Performance* (Marco De Marinis, 1982), *The Semiotics of Theatre* (Erika Fischer Lichte, 1983), *Theatre Semiotics* (Marvin Carlson, 1990), *A Semiotics of the Dramatic Text* (Susan Melrose, 1994), and *Theatre as a Sign-System* (Elaine Aston and George Savona, 1991). This state of the literature, which is by no means exhaustive, does not necessarily override the validity of semiotics in the field of practice. On the contrary, the application of the theory of semiotics to theatre, as shall be demonstrated in this book, will not only attenuate the distrust in theory we hinted at earlier, but also enable us to understand properly what a playtext can and cannot do, how its potential realization on the stage can bring other meanings into play, how the reader or audience responds to the text or its performance, and how an apparently 'austere' text can be thought of as being laden with signification and meaning. It will equally enable us to answer the question whether a semiotics of theatre will make possible the rethinking or rehabilitation of some of the labels and notions that became received tokens for the interpretation of theatre during the 1950s and 1960s.

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<sup>2</sup> K. M. Newton, *Theory into Practice: A Reader in Modern Literary Criticism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1992), p. 1.

## Introduction

Ranging from minimalist to reductionist, existentialist, nihilist, and absurdist were labels applied in the description of a dominant trend in the twentieth-century theatrical canon that is commonly associated with dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adorno, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and a number of avant-garde writers in France, Britain, Italy, Spain, the United States, and elsewhere. This trend of theatrical production came to be known under the heading of ‘the theatre of the absurd’.<sup>3</sup> Yet, however challenging and problematic this term might appear, it nevertheless entertained widespread acknowledgement among literary critics and students of literature over a certain span of time. It was not until the anti-totalizing spirit of postmodernism came to deconstruct this kind of recruitment that the term *absurd* started to relinquish its critical hegemony. The tradition of the absurd – as a framework of criticism – now stands polemically opposed to the more radical one, namely deconstruction, that treats the texts of the absurd as ideal models for the illustration of the notions of *différance*, absence, self-betrayal, self-subversiveness, discontinuity, non-referentiality, etc.

Among the above-stated playwrights, Samuel Beckett is certainly one whose dramatic works have been caught in the web of different interpretive worlds, the most dominant of which, however, are the phenomenological and the linguistic. The first tends to be philosophical in nature: it involves reflections on the intellectual and epistemological purport of theatre that raise the fundamental issues of existentialist and phenomenological speculations (these reflections are founded on the insights of twentieth-century philosophers like J. Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger). The second interpretive world has affinities with the latest concerns with language: it involves special interests in the differential nature of language and its various modes of signification in different types of discourse, including the poetic and the dramatic. It is mainly informed by the insights of De Saussure, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Foucault, and others whose theoretical findings not only have

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Esslin, *the Theatre of the Absurd* (Middlesex: Pelican Books, 1980), pp. 2-3.

## *The Semiotics of Beckett's Theatre*

changed the critics' understanding of literature, but also influenced their perception of art and the status of the work of art in general.

Having mentioned the work of art whose definition lies at the very heart of the modern debates about representation and meaning, we should leave aside for a moment the question of the division of critical views and concentrate more on how semioticians understand the work of art, because it is this understanding that will mark the distinctive nature of the alternative reading of Beckett's dramatic art we are suggesting here.

Defining the work of art from a semiotic point of view, Jan Mukarovsky explains:

Every work of art is an autonomous sign composed of: (1) an artifact functioning as perceivable signifier; (2) an 'aesthetic object' which is registered in the collective consciousness and which functions as 'signification'; (3) a relationship to a thing signified (this relationship refers not to any distinct existence – since we are talking about an autonomous sign – but to the total context of social phenomena, science, philosophy, religion, politics, economics, and so on, of any given milieu).<sup>4</sup>

The effect of Mukarovsky's statement as much perhaps as the effect of any general account of it one gives, is that any work of art is a sign, but a sign that is unique and autonomous. While this formulation reminds us of the New Critics' claim for the autonomy and uniqueness of the poetic work, it explicitly bears affinity with Beckett's view of the object of art as unique and sovereign, a view that in many ways accounts for the type of critical attitudes his work has invited and that also has implications for the semiotic approach we shall be using in this book. In one of his comments to George Duthuit published in 1949 as *Three Dialogues*, Beckett raises the question of the interpretation of the object of art in a very provocative way, he says:

But when the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general nature and detached from the

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<sup>4</sup> See Jan Mukarovsky, "Art as Semiotic Fact", in Matejka, p. 9.

## Introduction

sanity of cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and then only may it be a source of enchantment.<sup>5</sup>

This particular emphasis of Samuel Beckett on the object of art as something unique and as a source of enchantment calls into question the problem of signification in relation to artistic expression and to the interpretation of stage objects and literary discourses in general. Whether or not Beckett meant it, the words 'detached', 'isolated', and 'inexplicable' offer a prolific territory for the deconstructive methods of analysis that would make use of the lack of context and coherence to illustrate the much-debated concepts of absence, indeterminacy, free play of meaning and collapse of the centre, which have so far governed a large number of critical accounts of his fictional and dramatic works. The question that pauses itself, here, is the following: could Beckett have possibly intended to eliminate context stock and barrel from his plays and novels? If this had been the case, he would not have predicated his statement on the word 'perceived'. Perception is a context-bound notion. Perception always implies the translation of the perceived sign into a configuration of meaning(s) in the perceiver's mind and that such a configuration can only assume its final shape within a well-determined context of reception. The very word 'perceived', in fact, implies the existence of a certain perceiver, i.e. a certain addressee or decipherer whose active involvement in the process of signification and whose interaction with the object of art, be it text, stage object or actor's appearance, are necessary and elementary in any meaning-production process.

Mukarovsky's contention about the autonomy of the object of art as a 'perceivable signifier' and its ability to signify 'beyond distinct existence', that is beyond autonomy, seems to be in perfect tune with Beckett's idea that the object of art can only become a source of 'enchantment' when it is '*perceived* as particular and unique'. In both statements, the element of perception is fundamental for the ability of the object of art to signify. Meaning is not immanent in the work of art; it is rather the product of a

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Three Dialogues* (1949) in *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit* (London: Cadler, 1965), p. 22.

## *The Semiotics of Beckett's Theatre*

relation to a perceiver. Although Beckett might not have had in mind the pertinence of his statement to Peirce's definition of the sign as an entity that 'stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity'<sup>6</sup>, it can still invite a larger inquiry into the possibility of examining his dramatic works from a standpoint that treats the object of art as a sign while it recognizes the role of its perceiver in bringing it to signify. An inquiry of this kind can only be illuminated and informed by a *Peircean semiotics*, which takes into account not only the sign and the object to which it directly relates, but also the effect it creates in the mind of its receiver. However, before we draw the main landmarks or contours of such an inquiry, a word needs to be said about the position that semiotics occupies within the general theory of theatre as well as the place it holds within the general canon of Beckett's studies.

The semioticians of the 1980s, we listed previously, have made considerable efforts to bring the general theory of theatre in line with the writings of the early pioneers of theatre semiotics from the Prague School. Yet, despite their efforts, the performance text has not had an even portion in serious examination. While the written text in theatre has constantly engaged the attention of subsequent literary critics within the general framework of semiotics, the spectacle text, which is directly related to staged realization, has not had an equal share in those studies. As Marvin Carlson put it in his introduction to *Theatre Semiotics* (1991):

The majority of writing on this subject continues to focus primarily on the written text with occasional reflection on its scenic realization.<sup>7</sup>

The reason behind this is that the written script is a more accessible object of study, and as a verbal structure, it is more open to tools already developed for the analysis of narrative discourse. Similarly,

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce (1931-1958). *Collected Papers I – VIII* (C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. Burks, Eds.) Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press. 2.228. The number to the left of the decimal point is the volume, while the numbers to the right point to the paragraph. So 2.228 means volume two, paragraph. 228. To be cited hereafter *CP*.

<sup>7</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics* (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. xii.

## Introduction

Keir Elam, in his *Semiotics of the Theatre and Drama* (1980), brings into focus the distinction between the performance text and the dramatic text. By asking how many semiotics involved in the study of theatre, he stresses the fact that in any kind of theatre study, the researcher is faced with apparently two types of textual material: one is produced in theatre, that is to say in actual performance, the other is composed for theatre.<sup>8</sup> But however different their examination might be, the task of the semiotician should not be limited to the exclusive analysis of one of them at the expense of the other. The significance of any semiotic approach to theatre lies in the richness of perspective and in the ability to integrate the different sign-systems in play into a homogeneous whole that moulds up the final shape of theatricality that Roland Barthes so plainly defines as the 'density of signs'.

Actually, Barthes' conception of theatre is best summarized in his description of theatre as a 'cybernetic machine', which as soon as the curtain rises, diffuses a variety of simultaneous messages – from setting, costume, and lighting to the actors' positions, words and gestures – some of which remain constant for extended periods such as the setting, while others continuously change such as words and gestures.<sup>9</sup> The significance of Barthes' statement can be understood in two ways. First, it sums up the concept of theatre underlying the previously-mentioned approaches inasmuch as it foregrounds the polyfunctionality of the theatrical sign. Second, it calls into question another fundamental issue in theatrical communication, that of the role of the audience in receiving and interacting with these 'cybernetic' messages.

At this point, it is essential to remember that semiotics has historically been known for its close connection with discourse and with the theories of communication. It is therefore not accidental that a semiotics of theatre should naturally be as concerned with the production as with the reception of signs. It is in this direction that

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<sup>8</sup> Keir Elam, *the Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980; London: Routledge, 1991), p. 3. It should be noted here that Elam is not arguing about which type of texts has supremacy over the other. The question is whether or not "a semiotics of theatre and drama is conceivable as a bi- or multi-lateral but nevertheless integrated enterprise."

<sup>9</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 261-62.

## *The Semiotics of Beckett's Theatre*

semioticians like De Marinis, Pavis, and others have sought to keep theatre semiotics in harmony with post-structuralist poetics and reader-response analysis. Moreover, the increasing interest in semiotics as a communicative model grounded on a dialogic mode of signification is reflected in the most recent contributions to semiotic analysis, namely, Johansen's influential and seminal book *Dialogic Semiosis* (1993), which is based on the insights of Charles Sanders Peirce, and Elaine Aston's and George Savona's *Theatre as a Sign-System* (1992), where detailed attention is paid to the different articulations of dialogue, both on the level of character-character communication and on the level of the performer-spectator transaction. Attention is also paid, in Aston's and Savona's work, to the various forms of theatrical exchange as loci of signification.

Given that dialogue is central to the realization of dramatic illusion and the actualization of dramatic interaction (speaker-listener), it might appear at first glance that modern playtexts with their minimalization of dialogic exchange and disruption of the traditional functions characteristic of dramatic speech have purged theatre of its actual purport and dynamic nature. This is however an unjustified assumption. For, in theatre semiotics everything presented to the audience must be seen as value-laden. Even the absence of meaning is meaningful in semiotic understanding, just as the non-political in postmodern discourses, by virtue of its dissociation of the historical from the literary, is political. In their study of dialogue in relation to radical drama, using the Beckettian text as a model, Aston and Savona explain that modern playtexts are characterized by rule-breaking modes that have, in formalist terms, made strange or defamiliarized the linguistic sign-system. In order to make sense of the syntactic disruptions or lexical displacements a dramatic text may involve, it is necessary to read them and decode them as acts of transgression in the first place. Commenting on Beckett's minimalization of dialogue, they contend that:

because it is traditionally the function of dialogue to create the reality of the dramatic universe, the protagonists within it as constant and consistent elements for the duration of the fiction, Beckett's use of dialogue may be read as a process of destabilization...If it is possible to decode the text as a multi-layered system of

## Introduction

transgressive meanings, then the object of enquiry becomes the process whereby the lack of meaning or communication is established.<sup>10</sup>

While Aston and Savona find in semiotics a convenient answer to the question of the interruption of signification in Beckett's works, Anna McMullan, in her conclusion to *Theatre On Trial* (1993), opposes the view that semiotics could provide an adequate account of the phenomenon of interruption in theatre as a whole:

This interruption of the processes of signification in the theatre raises issues around theories of reading theatre. A number of recent critics have questioned the dominance of theatre semiotics as the most fruitful method of analyzing theatre. Semiotics was extremely useful in establishing the specificity of theatre and in the articulation of a vocabulary with which to analyze theatre performance. However, as Maria Minich Brewer suggests, traditional semiology presents a rather unproblematic view of the processes of signification and interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

This statement would perhaps be tenable if it were brought forward in a book on continental structuralism or continental semiology. But, to be advanced in a book on Beckett's later drama – which is accessible to semiotic exploration *par excellence* – and at a time when the study of theatre as a sign-system is gaining substantial interest among literary critics means that the author somehow underestimates the valuable contributions of semiotics to the field of drama criticism. In fact, McMullan's quoting of Brewer's question 'What happens to semiotic oppositions when they are challenged by the most diverse of theatrical practices?' reveals a certain reductionist view of semiotics, a view that confines semiotics to the constrictive frames of binary oppositions or the intrinsic analysis of the sign that are generally associated with continental structuralism. In Peircean understanding, the

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as a Sign-system* (London: Routledge, 1991), PP. 65-7

<sup>11</sup> Anna McMullan, *Theatre on Trial: Samuel Beckett's Later Drama* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 125.

study of signs and the study of literature as a process of signification/communication involve more than the mere operation of assigning signifieds to signifiers or concepts to sign-vehicles and rushing to the conclusion that signification is either maintained or interrupted.

Peirce's definition of the sign as an entity that 'stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity' as well as his concept of sign-translation 'a sign is not a sign unless it translates itself into another sign in which it is more fully developed'<sup>12</sup> have revolutionized the understanding of semiosis and have released the sign from the bonds of those linguistic models that are generally grounded on the logic of binary opposition. Peirce's notion of sign-translation is fundamental to the understanding of how semiotics opens such wide possibilities for the apprehension and interpretation of meaning. The meaning of a sign, in Peircean philosophy, is not to be found in the signified or in the referent; it must rather be sought in the whole triadic relation between the *sign*, its represented *object*, and its *interpretant*, which is defined as the effect the sign creates in the interpreting mind. But even the semantic configuration(s) that relation produces is/are never final. When the interpreter places the sign in the context of other signs, other meanings are assigned to the sign's represented object and the process of signification is further reinforced and enhanced. 'There is no exception', Peirce Explains,

to the law that every thought-sign is *translated* or interpreted in a subsequent one, unless it be that all thought comes to an abrupt and final end in death.<sup>13</sup>

As can be inferred from this statement, there is an interdisciplinary aspect to the theory of signs. For, if we allow signs to be translated into other signs in a particular context, there is no guarantee whatsoever that signification will be limited to that specific context or semantic field. For instance, when we think about literary expressions, we tend to make associations that often transcend the

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<sup>12</sup> Peirce, *CP*, 5. 594.

<sup>13</sup> Peirce, *CP*, 5.314. Emphasis added.

## Introduction

limits of those expressions and that cross over to other fields or contexts that are not always directly related to it, but this does not necessarily mean that we are conducting a semiotic analysis. Similarly, when we employ the word 'sign' or 'signifies' to comment on a given communicative situation or a given discursive practice, we can by no means claim that we are using a semiotic perspective unless the conclusions we derive are drawn on a systematic basis and the inferences we make are organized under specific rubrics or labels that are properly speaking semiotic.

In fact, the essays of literary criticism that employ the concept of signification or deploy the word sign are countless, but certainly not all of them are semiotic studies. So far as Beckett's criticism is concerned, apart from Keir Elam's *'Not I: Beckett's Mouth and The Ars(e) Rhetorica'* (1986) and Betty Rotjman's *Forme et signification dans le théâtre de Beckett* (1976), which are grounded on semiotic ethics, many of the essays written on Beckett's theatre focus on the processes of signification in relation to verbal and non-verbal signs, but they neither maintain consistent analyses of the way these signs communicate their meaning, nor do they make effective use of the findings of semiotics in the field. To mention but a few examples:

In his book *Light and Darkness in the Theatre of Samuel Beckett* (1972), James Knowlson, whose works on Beckett are very constructive and illuminating, explores the latter's relentless strategies of playing on light symbolism, but he does not extend his analysis to the relating sign-systems operating at the same time as lighting, which makes the discussion rather limited or unfinished, to say the least. Similarly, Angela Moorjani, in her article 'Beckett's Devious Deictics' (1990), uses the semiotic insights of Greimas and Courtés but she confines her analyses to linguistic signs only and never mentions explicitly that she is using a semiotic approach. This is added to other essays by Enoch Brater 'Light, Sound, Movement and Action in Beckett's *Rockaby*' (1982), Stanton B. Garner 'Visual Field in Beckett's Late Plays' (1988), and Pierre Chabert 'The Body in Beckett's Theatre' (1982), which neither involve a methodical investment in semiotic principles for the exploration of the sign-systems in question, nor furnish the ground for the study of those systems in such a way as to cover the complete dramatic works produced by the playwright.

## *The Semiotics of Beckett's Theatre*

As a matter of fact, when we look into Beckett's critical canon carefully, we become aware not only of the paucity of semiotic studies, but also of the striking diversity of the angles from which the author's works are viewed, a diversity that paradoxically validates the semiotic alternative we are proposing in this book. Just as obviously, if one assumes that the literary text is an act of communication involving *addresser – message – addressee*, one might be able to notice that no matter how divergent the various critical readings of Beckett are, they can readily be classified in terms of their relation to these three axes. Language-oriented approaches, for instance, have a propensity to treat the Beckettian text (*the message*) as a typical model illustrating their concerns about the limits of language, its fragmentary nature, and its potential for 'différance'. Classical psychoanalytical readings, on the other hand, tend to focus on Beckett's background (*the addresser*) and try to find answers to their inquiries in his childhood experiences or perhaps his unconscious motivations or drives. The interest in the text-producer is also the field of investigation of such biographical approaches that are primarily concerned with Beckett's life as well as the intellectual and philosophical contexts within which his works appeared (e.g. the existentialist tradition of thought). As for the third axis of this tripartite division (*the addressee*), one can easily notice that the general tendency towards the pragmatic and away from the structuralist approach has increasingly placed the Beckett reader or spectator and his/her reception of the dramatic work at the centre of the interpretive operation. Reception is seen as the process whereby the 'horizons of expectation' – defined as the set of cultural, ethical, and literary expectations held by readers at the historical moment of a work's appearance – govern the meaning and significance of the text.<sup>14</sup>

That the interpretations of Beckett are various and varied is a matter of sheer evidence. But the fact that some of them are virtually incompatible is a question that needs special scrutiny. To

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<sup>14</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards Aesthetics of Reception* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1989), p. 111. Jauss's main argument here is that literary texts cannot be understood appropriately if one focuses only on how they are produced without taking any account of their original reception and how they are perceived at different stages in history up until the present.

## Introduction

mention but one example, Livio A. C. Dobrez, in *The Existential and its Exits*, observes:

Beckett's work as a whole represents nothing less than a literary recapitulation of an entire tradition in philosophy from Descartes and his contemporaries to the present day or, more specifically from the rationalist stream of the seventeenth century to the idealist and , finally, to the existentialist movement.<sup>15</sup>

While Dobrez lays explicit emphasis on Beckett's relevance to the philosophical preoccupations of rationalist and existentialist thinkers, Thomas Trezise argues against any possibility of associating the author's work with the phenomenological or existentialist tradition of thought:

The phenomenological approach gains whatever insight it may afford from a conspicuous blindness to the dimension of Beckett's work that signals the exhaustion or failure of phenomenology itself, and that reflects moreover his affinity with relatively marginal but important figures as George Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, and, a generation later, the more publicized philosophers of difference, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida.<sup>16</sup>

The two views are clearly polarized. However, what they perhaps fail to notice is that Beckett's work has never been fully or consistently biased towards or against either extreme. In his theatre, he manages to concentrate diverse issues and myriad levels and layers of meaning without giving the reader/audience the impression that his work is self-defeating or unsettling to the interpreting mind. *Waiting for Godot*, for example, dramatizes the ontological predicament of the modern man while he is caught in the paralytic and excruciating trap of waiting; *Krapp's Last Tape* takes issue with

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<sup>15</sup> Livio A.C. Dobrez, *the Existential and its Exits* (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Trezise, *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* (Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 5.

the fragmented self and its reproduction within the intersecting labyrinths of the unconscious; *Happy Days* foregrounds the notions of self-awareness, the dialectics of alterity, the significance of the other's gaze, and the redemptive power of language in the absence of physical action; *Not I* recalls the Sartrean self-negation and makes allusions to the gender issue; *Catastrophe* evokes the images of authority and power relations in the act of direction; *Rockaby*, *Quad*, and *What Where* all enact the ritualistic practices of man and his desire to commune with the unseen as the system of ordinary communication breaks down; etc.

The processes of signification operating in Beckett's theatre are never quite continuous in any semantic capacity or respect. Sometimes meaning tends towards unity (e.g. the quest for identity and rehabilitation of the self in *Krapp's Last Tape*) and sometimes it tends towards interruption and absence (e.g. self-denial and the dissolution of the speaking subject in *Not I*). Similarly, the body in Beckett's later drama is interpreted as both framed in representation (e.g. the preparation of the body to represent an image of a catastrophe in *Catastrophe*) and as resisting those frames (e.g. the displacement and disorientation of the body in *A Piece of Monologue*).<sup>17</sup> The question that raises itself in this respect is the following: which theoretical standpoint is more applicable if we take into account the multiple avenues of inquiry Beckett's work so markedly opens? Indeed, to claim that Beckett's texts can solely be approached from a phenomenological perspective and that the language-oriented methods are simply irrelevant or vice-versa does no more than highlights some aspects of these texts and overlooks others. Such a practice, of course, can by no means ensure a comprehensive aspect to the interpretive work; it can only isolate different layers and spheres of signification from the text and effect an eclectic choice that serves, in the last analysis, the interest of the theory applied.

What is also common to the above-mentioned approaches is that they seem to have placed the written text or the verbal sign, in semiotic terms, at the centre of their critical discussions. Since the Beckettian text is characterized by its language economy and its tendency towards minimalization, it follows that critical attention

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<sup>17</sup> See McMullan, pp. 25-60.

## Introduction

should be as much concerned with language as with other systems of signification, properly speaking theatrical, such as: the actor's activities as signs (kinesic, proxemic, and gestural), spatial signs (decoration, lighting, and props), and auditory signs like sound and music.<sup>18</sup> Bearing in mind that Beckett's theatre attaches great importance to nonverbal signification, and in view of the problems of interpretation stated earlier, it seems evident to me that only a holistic approach that is grounded on semiotic ethics can offer a comprehensive exegesis of Beckett's dramatic world, paying equal attention to the different systems and sub-systems that constitute its expressive potential(s).

The present book comprises three parts: the systemic level (theatre as a sign-system), the epistemic level (theatre as a locus of philosophical semiosis), and the code level (theatre as a multi-coded expression). In the first part, attention will be given to those components of theatre that can be treated as 'signs'. The emphasis will accordingly be placed on the signifying processes and polarities of reference forming the basis of Beckett's plays, with a view to foregrounding the factors of interdependence and interaction between the sign-systems that underlie them. In the second part, we shall make use of Peirce's discussions of the philosophical dimensions of the sign to demonstrate that the signifying systems and signifying processes operating in Beckett's plays are replete with philosophical contents. We shall also demonstrate that these contents can be organized into well-defined paradigms that will constitute the following sub-divisions: the language problematic by way of Beckett, ontological semiosis, and time semiosis. In the third part, we shall make of the mythological, psychological, and socio-historical codes the locus of an investigation that, while taking apart the three elements for methodological reasons, will treat them as integral parts of a single comprehensive system of cultural

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<sup>18</sup> In his own directions of his plays Beckett has always given special instructions concerning the representation of non-verbal signs, particularly in terms of appropriateness, accuracy, and efficiency. For more elucidation, see Martha Fehsenfeld in Katherine H. Burkman, ed. *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1987), pp. 50-55. Or, Lois Oppenheim, *Directing Beckett* (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1997), pp. 295-314.

## *The Semiotics of Beckett's Theatre*

expression, testifying once more to the semiotic richness of Beckett's theatre.

To recapitulate briefly, and as we have explained above, semiotics is an interdisciplinary field of research and Beckett's theatre is one that engages a large spectrum of subjects and concerns that touch upon multiple aspects of human experience. The Beckettian dramatic text, as shall be demonstrated in this book, is a fertile ground for a semiotic investigation that is orchestrated by the profound insights of C. S. Peirce. As it applies semiotics to Beckett's theatre, this book seeks to preserve, communicate and throw into relief those 'universal values' in the playwright's works, which remain unchallenged despite every change and every revolution in human societies.

What this book will hopefully contribute to the general canon of theatrical studies is its study of the Beckettian dramatic text not as a model of the 'absurd' tradition, but rather as a cultural product whose writer's thinking can scarcely be dissociated from the cultural environment within which it took shape, and whose deciphering requires the use of cultural codes and sub-codes that will undergo detailed examination in the course of analysis, a study that we may so generically call a cultural semiotic study of Beckett.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Many of the references we have so far included in the footnotes will reappear in the footnotes of other sections in *full form*. The same applies whenever we move from one section to another. This allows each section to be independent and makes things easier for the reader.

**THE SYSTEMIC LEVEL**  
**THEATRE AS A SIGN-SYSTEM**

*The Semiotics of Beckett's Theatre*

# 1. THE SYSTEMIC LEVEL: THEATRE AS A SIGN-SYSTEM

If, on the basis of the logical ground that theatrical communication is only possible through the systematic investment of the signs of a given culture, we tend to consider theatre as a semiotic system *par excellence*, then our study of the theatre of Samuel Beckett and of theatrical production in the broadest sense can only be made possible through the detailed examination and exploration of the various sign-systems that function in combination within the text to produce the structures of meaning necessary for the construction of its communicative import. At this level, one should note, before embarking on a systematic discussion of the theatrical sign, that our study of the playtext, that is the written work, does not exclude the possibility of referring to actual performances of Beckett's theatre. This derives from our conviction that theatre as a system can never reach full significance unless we draw on the possibility of its performance, or at least, unless we have staged realization in mind while examining its textual repertoire.

The structures of meaning that are primarily the products of the combination of sign systems like: kinesics, costume, make-up, lighting, props, space, and music act as 'catalysts for the transformation' of the text into performance.<sup>1</sup> Again, Barthes' statement that the playtext is 'something to be done', and Francis Fergusson's assertion that directors and actors tend to have a direct and primitive perception of action in a dramatic situation – what he calls the histrionic sensibility – suggest that the written text and the actual performance are interdependent aspects of theatricality.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Donahue, *Structures of Meaning* (London: and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1993), p. 16. In his introductory chapter Donahue expresses his intention to explore "the possibility of transforming the text into performance and the structures of meaning that act as catalysts for transformation..."

<sup>2</sup> See Barthes and Fergusson in Donahue, pp. 10-15.