

Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama

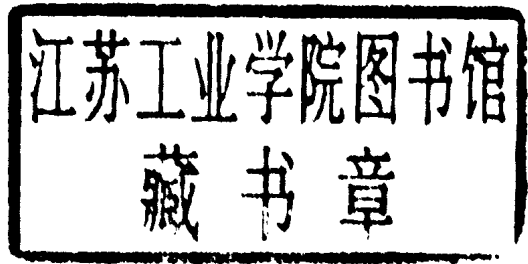
W. B. WORTHEN



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Introduction: booking the play

I want to recall one of the most concentrated scenes of modern drama, the hushed reading of the “sad tale a last time told” that occupies the brief action of Samuel Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu*. The play has all the elements of late Beckett: two nearly immobile figures, seated in a precise geometry (one in profile, one facing forward) at the end of a long table, each with “*Left hand on table. Long black coat. Long white hair.*”¹ The character in profile, audience right, called the Reader in the script, reads aloud from a book, while the character facing us, called the Listener, seems to listen. When the Listener knocks on the table, the Reader either repeats the passage he has just read, or resumes his recitation from the point of interruption.

The Reader is nearing the end of a long story, told in the third person, climaxing in what we take to be the Listener’s violation of the final “unspoken words” of a lover, “Stay where we were so long alone together, my shade will comfort you.” As in other plays – *Krapp’s Last Tape* (“Farewell to love” read the notes on box three, spool five [217]) or *Not I* (“so no love . . . spared that” [376]) – the avoidance of love impels a mournful, even purgatorial retelling of the past. It seems to have been a long story. When the Listener hears “the fearful symptoms described at length page forty paragraph four,” he restrains the Reader from turning back to check the citation. Having repeated the story, having again reached its end, they seem finally to have reached *the* end. The Reader reads:

So the sad tale a last time told they sat on as though
turned to stone. Through the single window dawn shed no
light. From the street no sound of reawakening. Or was it
that buried in who knows what thoughts they paid no
heed? To light of day. To sound of reawakening. What
thoughts who knows. Thoughts, no, not thoughts.
Profounds of mind. Buried in who knows what profounds
of mind. Of mindlessness. Whither no light can reach. No
sound. So sat on as though turned to stone. The sad tale

a last time told.

[Pause.]

Nothing is left to tell.

[Pause. R makes to close book.

Knock. Book is half closed.]

Nothing is left to tell.

[Pause. R closes book.

Knock.

Silence. Five seconds.

Simultaneously they lower their right hands to table,
raise their heads and look at each other. Unblinking.

Expressionless.

Ten seconds.

Fade out.]

Like the iconic heroes of Yeats's plays – in *At the Hawk's Well*, Cuchulain "receded but to inhabit as it were the deeps of the mind" ("Certain Noble Plays" 224) – Beckett's characters recede from speaking into silence, from narrative into image, frozen in an unblinking tableau that recalls Beckett's persistent interest in such final moments, Didi and Gogo's "Yes, let's go. [They do not move.]," Hamm reassuming his veil, Willie turning the gun on Winnie, Krapp motionless in the cone of white light listening to the spooling tape.

In play after play, Beckett's drama reflects on the condition of theatre, a series that comes to an ironic climax in the authoritarian, Beckett-like director's obsession with the interplay between language and gesture in *Catastrophe*, another play that ends in an eloquent image, as the Protagonist "raises his head, fixes the audience" while the applause falters, and the light fades out on his face (461). From Pozzo warming up with his atomizer to the torturing of Bam, Bem, Bim, and Bom to "say it" (472), Beckett's drama theatricalizes narrative, *staging* speech as the figure of human agency, human consciousness. *Ohio Impromptu* shares in this lineage, but the play is unique in Beckett's work for materializing that narrative onstage as a text, a book. Indeed, *Ohio Impromptu* is a rarity in the history of theatre in staging the book as the source of dramatic action. Yes, there are a number of famous "reading" scenes in classical (Malvolio's letter) and in modern drama (Ellie Dunn falling asleep over her copy of *Othello*), but these brief acts of reading are usually incidental means of advancing the plot. In *Ohio Impromptu* the action visibly arises from the book: as Jonathan Kalb noted in his 1983 review, "It's as if the characters cleverly steal brief moments of human contact while constrained to a physical situation which prohibits such exchange" (*Beckett in Performance* 50). The action of

Ohio Impromptu is the act of reading and listening. Insofar as the action emerges from the book, staging its complicity with writing, *Ohio Impromptu* allegorizes the situation of modern drama itself, the interdependence of the arts of writing and performance in the age of print.²

The material challenges that Beckett's writing pose to acting have been familiar for some time, but the challenge to our understanding of drama posed by the plays as printed objects, as books, is just coming into view. Is the identity of the drama held in the author's inert inscription or its betrayal into living performance? Beckett's writing, especially his elaborate stage directions, frames a rarefied aesthetic problem, one that has been engaged by several controversial stage productions, notably by JoAnne Akalaitis's *Endgame* at the American Repertory Theatre in 1984, and by Deborah Warner's 1994 environmental *Footfalls* at the Garrick Theatre in London, to name only the two most familiar cases. *Ohio Impromptu* captures the duplicitous impact of print on modern drama and on modern theatre. On the one hand, the Reader seems to control the action, modeling stage performance as a kind of reading, as though performance were governed, exhausted, even executed by the book. On the other hand, the Listener's act, knocking on the table, controls the pace and delivery of the text's incarnation in and as performance. His gestures determine the *repetition* (recalling the French), the quite literal *rehearsal* of the written text as spoken, acted dialogue, as stage action. As the Reader and the Listener merge into a single, divided image of the theatre's resistance and captivity to the text, they stage the friction between writing and enactment that defines modern drama.

Staging the book, *Ohio Impromptu* stages the constitutive questions of drama in the age of print: What is the work of "literature," or, to use a less contested term, "writing" in the theatre? What is the status or being or force of dramatic writing relative to the drama's existence as performance? Is the printed book an adequate delivery system for plays? Is it a delivery system at all?

Needless to say, to ask such questions means bracketing a number of crucial issues. Theatrical performance has everything to do with everything that's beyond the text: the practices and ideologies of directing and design, of acting and dance, of architecture and economics, the unscripted materiality of stage production. This may sound, for the moment, as though I'm bracketing *all* of theatre, and in one respect I am. To the extent that we consider bodies, spaces, and how we use them the stuff of dramatic performance, then writing (in those forms of theatre that use writing at all) is merely one among many such materials, not the abstract cause

or governing *logos* of the stage, but another kind of raw material – like lumber and canvas, or the theatre space, or even the actors' bodies – that is refashioned and resignified in the rigorously pragmatic working-out of the creative business of the playing. The rise of a “literary,” print-inflected understanding of drama has tended to overplay the role of writing in the work of theatre. For while we might think that it's the function of the stage to flesh out, fill out, even fulfill the playwright's design, this conventional understanding of the relationship between dramatic writing and its theatrical performance in Western theatre has little footing in the history of dramatic performance. As the changing forms of stage Chekhov in the past century or of stage Beckett in half that time imply, the rhetoric of embodiment and the panoply of practices deployed with, around, and beyond the text to create a meaningful dramatic event are remarkably volatile. Classical drama is even more instructive in this regard. In the past four centuries of playing Shakespeare, characters have dropped into and out of performance (Lear's fool, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), have been entirely rewritten (Cordelia in Nahum Tate's *King Lear*) or invented (Miranda's brother in Dryden's *Tempest*), and various essentials of performance (the witches' *corps de ballet* in eighteenth-century *Macbeth*, Shylock's red wig, Beerbohm Tree's bunnies, the spare “epic” platform of the Royal Shakespeare Company in the 1960s) have come and gone. But the shifting designs of Shakespeare in performance are not merely a record of changing taste; they record a changing understanding of the ratio between writing and performance, of what the writing can and should be made to *do*. Even in the shorter span of the past century, the variety of “authentic” or “faithful” performances – Stanislavsky's tragic Chekhov, Andrei Serban's experimental Chekhov, André Gregory's ironic Chekhov – point to an important fact about writing in the theatre. The impression of a production's relation to the script, its fidelity to or betrayal of an “authorial” design, is not the cause of a performance's meaning but its consequence, the after-effect of the work that the production has done to the text, with the text, through the text, against the text, and, *necessarily*, beyond the text. For performance does not so much interpret the text as rewrite it in the incommensurable idiom of the stage. Much as is the case when we read other forms of writing – aspects of T. S. Eliot's poems, or of W. B. Yeats's, that were quite literally invisible twenty or thirty years ago seem now to be massively, unavoidably *there*, to constitute the poems' central meanings – so the stage practices that seem most fully and essentially to express the drama's force in the physicality of theatre will appear and disappear as our ways of reading plays, performing ourselves, and acting in the theatre change.

Chekhov's claustral delicacy no longer seems to demand three standing walls and practical doors to take the stage; Didi and Gogo don't always wear bowlers.

Of course, bracketing theatre in this way only serves to underscore what we are bracketing it from: the massively literary understanding of dramatic performance that has arisen with and through the age of print. Print – the printing process, the forms and shapes of printed books – has long troped our understanding of the lush variety of cultural production. And while print is no longer the master metaphor of literate culture, as its shadow recedes we can gain a clearer sense of print's pervasive conceptual and ideological embrace of our understanding of stage performance. Historians (Elizabeth Eisenstein) and iconoclasts (Marshall McLuhan) of print have ably, if controversially, demonstrated the impact of print on most aspects of human culture, and on our understanding of what it means to be human, even as the models and metaphors of humanity derived from print are inexorably giving way to those drawn from digital technologies.³ Print has also decisively fashioned our understanding of literature and the literary, both by making texts (including some, like Chaucer's, not originally printed, or like Homer's, not originally written) widely available, and – perhaps more fundamentally – by helping to frame our sense of the intrinsic values of writing itself. If theatre companies were among the earliest capitalist enterprises as joint stockholding corporations, printing houses helped to define the assembly-line: printing books requires a significant degree of rationalization, the organization of complex tasks in a sequence of production, assembly, and distribution. For this among other reasons the rise of print has tended to articulate certain values – standardization (of letterforms), regularization (of spelling and punctuation), formalization (of distinct genres, each with its own conventions of layout, design, marketing), repeatability and reiteration (of new editions) – which have become intrinsic to modern notions of literature and the literary, sustaining a canon of stable texts, promoting the “author” as a determining element of literary identity, and embodying “literary identity” as the closure of the qualities attributed to print. These are also the values ascribed to writing by the academic study of modern vernacular literatures, born at the moment – the late nineteenth century – when print culture might be said to have reached its zenith, still unrivalled by other means of mass communication (film, radio, television) or by digital means of creating and disseminating writing.

From the beginning, though, drama has been an anomaly in print culture. Print production cannot fully determine the identity of dramatic

writing because drama also takes shape elsewhere, in the incommensurable practices of the stage. Through the first three hundred years of dramatic publishing, this duality was more or less unremarkable, however frequently it was remarked. True, Ben Jonson was lampooned for publishing *plays* in his *Works*, William Prynne inveighed against the printing of Shakespeare's plays on finer paper than was used in many Bibles, and William Congreve worked closely with his printer Jacob Tonson to regularize the look of his *plays on the page*, going so far as to purchase special type fonts from the Netherlands.⁴ But while these chestnuts locate a series of efforts to inscribe printed drama with the signs of literature, a "literary" understanding of the integrity of the author's writing had relatively little impact on the stage – which enthusiastically rewrote, adapted, cut-and-pasted play texts – or, apparently, on the pleasure of audiences.

In the English-speaking world, the absorption of drama to literature and of the ontology of theatre to the iterative logic of print develops slowly and inconsistently, and as we might expect, Shakespeare's plays stand at the center of this history. The editing and reediting of Shakespearean drama in the eighteenth century, culminating in Edmond Malone's 1790 edition, marks a crucial sea-change not only in Shakespeare's fortunes but in the relationship between drama, literature, and the stage. As Margreta de Grazia has shown in *Shakespeare Verbatim*, Malone's edition did more than ride the wave of Shakespeare's increasing popularity and celebrity as the national poet and playwright. Malone's edition gave a bookish shape to Shakespeare as an "author," anachronistically mapping a modern, print-derived, sense of the organic stability of "literary" creation onto the fluid and pragmatic terms of Shakespeare's working life as a writer for the stage.⁵ The consequences of understanding dramatic writing as print literature in this way, as both prior to and finally beyond the signifying limits of theatre, are refracted in complex ways throughout the nineteenth century: in the poets' dogged imitation of a "Shakespearean" verse drama that is (unlike Shakespeare's) often explicitly inimical to the stage; in Charles Lamb's notions of the intrinsic antipathy between Shakespeare's writing and live performance; in the developing practice of publishing reading editions of plays alongside stage productions, as books whose designs distinguish them from "acting editions" (which become popular at this time, too). This dialectic was part of Shakespeare's theatre, as Jonson's (to say nothing of Hamlet's) many complaints about the improvisations of actors imply. But the cultural identity of drama in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was still very much in flux, as the occasional efforts by playwrights (Jonson, Congreve) or "publishers" (Heminge and Condell for Shakespeare, Moseley for

Beaumont and Fletcher) to shape the drama's identity on the page were fully offset by the practices of successive eras of theatre, which clearly subject what we now take to be the prescriptive order of "the text" to forms of production that assiduously multiply, diversify, and disintegrate any sense of the page's priority to the stage. By the late nineteenth century, when Shaw and Ibsen not only attended to the formal design of their plays on the page but also to their appearance as books, this print-driven sense of the identity and proper transmission of writing came to sustain the common-sense view of dramatic performance, what it means to attend to the performance of a play.

As print becomes the dominant means of asserting and representing the literary identity of writing, it gradually assimilates the understanding of drama and dramatic performance to the rhetoric of print. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and well into the nineteenth century, the notion that the staging of a play should reflect its bookish or literary form was belied by the practices of the theatre, which have only gradually approximated to the reiterative ideologies of print culture. Print inflects writing with certain properties, and with certain values as property, urging the singular, authorial and authorized identity of the work across its many reproductions, and so claiming the work's stability across time and space, and across matter, too, as it is materialized in new and different shapes, sizes, formats, and (in many cases) even in different words on the page. The insistence that these palpably distinct objects are *the same thing*, or – to use the rather theological jargon of editing – that they transmit the same *substantial* work, clothed in the merely *accidental* differences of punctuation, capitalization, type style, layout, words on the page, marks the deeply ideological working of print in print culture. Traditionally, print culture located print as the site of the work's identity, while also taking the individual printed object, the book, as a kind of surrogate. In this view, the work of art (*Hamlet*, *The Ambassadors*, "Easter 1916") can be reproduced in better or worse editions, more or less "faithfully," even with one set of words or another, but the *work itself* is finally unaltered by the material conditions of its emergence in history, its materialization in a specific printform. From the insistence that print merely reproduces or reiterates the *same* work across a range of editions (the notion that *Hamlet* is the same thing in all the quite different versions of it you might have on your shelf), it's a small step to the sense that the work can *and should* be understood as *the same thing* across different modes of production, in different media, the sense that performance is merely a reiteration of the text by other means, means that aspire to conditions of mechanical reproducibility that seem