

# How It Is Symposium. Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris. 23 February, 2018.

**Amanda Dennis**

On a rare sunny day in late February, Beckett scholars, theatre practitioners and enthusiasts gathered at the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris for a daylong symposium devoted to Beckett's 1961 novel, *Comment C'est (How It Is)*. The occasion for the conference was, in part, Gare St Lazare Ireland's premiere of *How It Is (part one)* on February 1st at the Everyman Theatre in Cork.

Gare St Lazare Ireland's director, Judy Hegarty Lovett, who organized the Paris symposium, said that the company spent three years staging part one. They will devote the next three years to parts two and three. Because this is a "significant engagement with a singular work," she said, "we wanted to engage with practitioners and academics alike to discuss this novel."

The result was a lively discussion of the novel's many facets, including Beckett's engagement with the work of Dante and Sade, his formal experimentation (white space, lack of punctuation, cyclicity), representations of bodily violence, historical circumstances of the text's composition (amidst news of torture during the Algerian War), and the place of the work in Beckett's canon, contemporaneous with several of his radio plays. The symposium included a roundtable with Gare St Lazare Ireland, during which the members of the theatre company described the improvisational methods they used to stage the text: listening to each other—what sound designer Mel Mercier referred to as "deep sonar"—and work in progress sessions in which the audience become part of the work.

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Keynote speakers, Jean-Michel Rabaté and Daniela Caselli, made different cases for *How It Is* as a Sadean reading of Dante. Jean-Michel Rabaté began the day with a paper in French on Beckett and Sade, arguing that Sade permitted Beckett to read the *Inferno* in a different way. Beckett's reading of Sade favored *101 Days of Sodom*, which he nearly translated for Jack Kahane's Obelisk press (the project never materialized). His praise (in a letter) of Sade's composition—"extraordinary, as rigorous as Dante's"—suggests an image of the libertine not as one who enjoys (*jouir*) the suffering of others but as one who can inflict suffering without passion, according to measure. For

Rabaté, *Comment C'est* puts into fiction the impossibility of thinking of the world according to Sade's reason, and perhaps—given Adorno and Horkheimer's reading of Sade as a calamitous extension of Kantian reason—reason in general taken to an unbearable extreme.

Daniela Caselli's keynote suggested that *How It Is* signals a turn to sexuality in Beckett's work—not the erotic optimism observed by Badiou, but a sexuality in which the individual is subsumed under a formal pattern or system. Caselli cites Beckett's gender-neutral characters and the mud that softens individuation, reminding us of Dante's damned in the fifth circle of hell, wallowing in the mud by the river Styx, striking and biting each other, or, submerged, making bubbles on the surface. Beckett's move away from individualized sexuality towards an economy of excess—another reading of mud—erodes divisions between geometry (as measure) and passion, abstraction and experience, and transparent meaning and opaque materiality. The text's presentation of sexuality as a de-individualized, formal system, she argued, suggests a Sadean reading of Dante.

The symposium's two panels turned to the challenges of performing *How It Is* and to the circumstances of its composition. Nick Johnson began the first panel by asking what makes a text (or artwork) performable; he spoke of Patrick Magee's recording, Trinity College students reading Beckett aloud, and Mirosław Balka's *How It Is* at the Tate in 2009. He emphasized the importance of process-based (rather than ends-focused) performance practice. Next, Dúnlaith Bird gave a provocative reading of *How It Is* around the theme of electricity, and Pim Verlhust gave a convincing account of the works' radiophonic origins, dating Beckett's writing of *Pochade Radiophonique (Rough for Radio II)* to 1958, the year Beckett began *Comment C'est*. Verlhust suggested that the white space "eating away" at the prose in *Comment C'est* mirrors the technical interference of static in the radio plays.

The second panel began with Peter O'Neill's paper on the invocation of the Homeric muse; it included a discussion of Vico that prompted Jean-Michel Rabaté to ask during the question period whether *How It Is*—given its cyclicity—might be read as version in miniature of *Finnegans Wake*. Next, Dan Gunn, who edited the four volumes of Beckett's letters, described Beckett's difficulty naming the text in progress that would become *Comment C'est*; he expresses doubts about the work in letters to Barbara Bray. Finally, Anna McMullan discussed Gare St Lazare's *How It Is*—in which the audience enters through the wings and is seated onstage—transitioning the symposium to the practitioners' roundtable.

During the roundtable, Judy Hegarty Lovett described how the text's allusion to other voices—"an ancient voice in me not mine"—and its uncertainty about who is speaking inspired the inclusion of two actors (instead of one) and a soundscape designed by Mel Mercier. Mercier described the rehearsal process as one of deep listening—a process that continues, since he varies soundscape for each performance. The theatrical adaptation of the text seemed to mirror the process-based, experimental nature of Beckett's work, especially insofar as it privileges deep listening—"I say it as I hear it"—and continual feedback. The absence of punctuation leaves the rhythms and divisions of the lines up to each reader, making both text and performance labile.

The day concluded with a reading by actors Conor Lovett and Stephen Dillane, followed by dinner and drinks, symposium fashion, at Aux Delices du Liban.

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