The Beckett Circle

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Symposium Review: How It Is by Samuel Beckett Symposium 2019

Organised by Gare St Lazare Ireland in association with Cork Midsummer Festival and the Crawford Art Gallery Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, Ireland. 14th June 2019

Review by Céline Thobois

Following the much acclaimed performance of *How It Is Part I* last year, Gare St Lazare Ireland returned in September 2109 to the Everyman Theatre in Cork with *How It Is Part II*. In anticipation, company director Judy Hegarty Lovett gathered Beckett scholars, artists, theatregoers and readers for a day of discussion based around ongoing research on *How It Is*, and the novel's potential for adaptation. The Crawford Art Gallery was an excellent venue for the event, contributing to the text's interdisciplinary approach. Walking into the gallery, I came across James stained-glass window *Lonradh* (1993) located in the building's main staircase. It looked like this piece of art was almost there as an illustration of *How It Is* and as a synthesis of the symposium. The middle right-hand side pane shows an eye, above which is written in capital letters "SCAN", resonating with the importance of seeing and perception in Beckett's novel which Lois Oppenheim problematised in her keynote. The windowpane next to the eye displays the words "Big Bang", "Will the crack last", and a big question mark on a greyish background. It brought to mind the following segment of *How It Is*: "that kind an image not for the eyes made of words not for the ears the day is ended I'm safe till tomorrow the mud opens I depart". The symposium's rich discussions, which I will outline here, not only showed that *How It Is* is a crack in Beckett's work and in the sphere of literature in general, but also that Gare St Lazare Ireland's adaptation of the novel is a crack in the history of staging, performing and adapting Beckett's texts.

The Crawford Gallery, Cork.

Lonradh by James Scanlon

Lois Oppenheim's keynote opened the symposium, discussing what it means to see and to be seen in *How It Is* and how the experience of observing the paintings of Agnes Martin can provide hints to those questions. She argued that Merleau-Ponty's concepts of perception and projection define the narration of *How It Is*, suggesting that in the mud we find "a perceptual overlapping of seeing and being seen" and the matter where form and formlessness are constantly put in tension; thus *How It Is* comes into being "through a layering of perception over perception." In a similar fashion, Agnes Martin gives form to formlessness providing "an extension of perception": "The condition of seeing is for Beckett as for Martin, in itself an object of perception, a perception of what it is to be." Oppenheim contended that in this complex process of seeing and being seen, the mind becomes unrepresentable. She thinks that this difficulty, which manifests itself in Part I of *How It Is*, has been successfully dealt with by Gare St Lazare Ireland in their production, thanks to the sequencing of voices as well as the immersive experience that they offered to their viewers "of being seen while seeing." Oppenheim then invited us to think about what we see in *How It Is*, arguing that what Beckett achieves is the shaping of somatic cognition. Oppenheim noted that the fragmentation of the body makes it impossible to see and to be seen, and that *How It Is* therefore appears as a prose work which is articulated by the tension between embodiment and bodilessness. Oppenheim concluded that Beckett's *How It Is* and Martin's grids both reveal and expose process in a minimalist fashion, demonstrating that it is in the experimental quality of investigating through the objectified self "how it is", "that it is", "what it is", "how we see how it is" and even more so "who it is" that lies the potential for adaptation and performance of *How It Is*.

Following with the questions on corporeality which Oppenheim raised, the first panel discussed embodiment and violence in *How It Is*. Hannah Simpson offered a parallel reading of *How It Is* and *What Where*, revealing the striking similarities between the two texts, especially when it comes to torture. She identified torture as the trigger for speech, arguing that "both texts engage with the link between physical pain and the intersubjective expression", and suggesting that physical pain in *How It Is* and *What Where* is both performed through communication and also an obstacle to communication. Simpson therefore interpreted pain as "the limit point for communication between self and other"; through the experience of pain and suffering, Beckett constructs the body as the locus for the articulation of self and other subjectivities. In Part II of *How It Is*, Simpson affirms that "pain is denied as pain", manifested only in acts of violence, with suffering thus alienated from the victim. Working with Elaine Scarry's theorising, Simpson interpreted pain as the internal transubjective suffering of the body: both characters suffering each other. She concluded that pain *is* the other and that, combined with the unstable text of *How It Is*, as well as the violence of the encounter between Bom and Pim, it complicates the stage adaptation of Part II.

Peter O'Neill focused on violence too, exploring this notion in *How It Is* as intertextual and political. His presentation was marked by lively readings of extracts from *Comment c'est*, *How It Is* and *Finnegans Wake*. He started by drawing a close filiation between *Finnegans Wake* and *Comment c'est*, asserting that the character of Vico is key to the understanding of *How It I*s not only as an independent work, but also in the context of Hitler's Germany. Building on the historical context of ancient Roman patriarchy laws, he then contended that violence manifests itself also as possession in the novel, reading *How It Is* as the result of Beckett's abhorrence for violence and patriarchy. Hence, he argued that an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to understand the complex articulation of violence in *How It Is*. As a side note wrapping up his presentation, O'Neill also read possession as one of the key concepts behind the grotesque of *How It Is*. He concluded that *Finnegans Wake* is a book for the ear, whereas *How It Is* is a book for the mouth as the main orifice of the human body.

Bringing the first panel to a close, Fergal Gaynor investigated breath and breathlessness both as the main motor of the performative quality of the text and as forms of co-suffering. Drawing from Conor Lovett's experience of performing *How It Is Part I*, Gaynor contended that the actor needs to make a real effort to find where to breathe, and that breath is thus constitutive of the text. He observed that this phenomenon is not unique in *How It Is*, finding the same pattern in *Not I*, and in a more condensed form in *Breath*, and pointed out that breath can be thought in terms of suspiration, aspiration, and expiration. His etymological study of those three words led him to a reading of breath as "*spiritus*". On the one hand, Gaynor argued that breath therefore adds an extra-human element to the text and to the experience of reading or performing the text. This also led him to engage with the religious meaning of breath as "spiritus" and "anima". Gaynor highlighted the importance of breath in the passion narrative, explaining that breath as expiration comes as Christ's last bodily response to intense suffering; quoting Saint Paul, Gaynor read resurrection as "the most unfortunate event" and *How It Is* as a form of "amputated christology", in his own words. On the other hand, he noted that breathing in *How It Is* requires an extreme bodily effort, the text's "panting" reducing breath to a biological necessity and bringing man closer to animal; "*anima*" becomes the animated thing, and the sadistic relation between Pim and Bom in Part II adds to the animality of the creature inhabiting *How It Is*. Gaynor concluded that breath in *How It Is* is the physical expression and experience of co-suffering and that breathlessness encapsulates Beckett's "art of pitiless compassion."

Stephen Dillane preparing for a rehearsed reading of *How it Is* [Part Two]

Anthony Cordingely opened the afternoon session, giving a keynote talk that introduced his work for the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project (BDMP), which consists of the digitising of *How It Is* manuscripts and typescripts. Cordingley first took a practical approach, navigating across the digital archive and showing how to find a specific document, a particular sentence or even a word in a manuscript. He then focused on his genetic studies of *How It Is*, demonstrating that what is special about this novel is the length of the genesis process and how well-documented it is. Cordingley showed how the genetic study of *How It Is* brings a huge contribution to the stylistic understanding of the novel, drawing our attention in particular to how Beckett removed punctuation from the text and how the text evolved into paragraphs. Moving on to the narration in *How It Is*, Cordingley evidenced through his genetic work that the early narrator of *How It Is* is a writer and the later narrator is an editor, with the "narrator as narrated" emerging in the writing and editing process. This led him to argue that *How It Is* is very much an exercise of editing torture – and, thanks to the different tools that the BDMP offers, he also demonstrated that, for Beckett, translating himself turns out to be "a torture exercise" in itself. The audience was suitably impressed by the titanic work that the BDMP requires to provide all the functions that allow to trace back the genesis of the text, and curious to know when Cordingley thinks that the *How It Is* module will be fully available on the BDMP. (His answer: in another two to three years.)

After Cordingley's framing of *How It Is* as an emerging product or process of construction via the BDMP, the second panel discussed *How It Is* as a creative impulse, a starting point for other artists.

Gareth Evans, in his paper entitled "How It Is… That… Major Themes and Other Such Trifles" described Beckett's work as "a cosmos, an expanding one", and noted that Cordingley's genetic studies and digitising work contributes to broadening the Beckett cosmology. Evans identified two approaches of the work for Beckett's audiences more broadly: urgency and patience. Coming to *How It Is*, he suggested that it is about an occupied time-space and what goes on within it. He argued that, being occupied, those time-spaces become place, and that the media that Beckett resorted to across his artistic life are different occupied time-spaces. The recourse to those medial places shows according to him that Beckett is "both about the edit and the continuity." To illustrate his idea of an expanding Beckettian cosmos in a variety of directions, he turned to the example of Nicol Williamson reading lines of *How It Is* for three minutes in a 1964 TV chat show before a performance of the Rolling Stones. In 2014, the text read by Williamson has been turned into a YouTube video, which Evans described as "a horrendous animation with a face in the mud." He concluded his presentation with an analysis of Gare St Lazare Ireland's performance of *How It Is Part I*, suggesting that there is "a sense of motion, meeting and motionlessness" in the text of *How It Is* which Gare St Lazare has achieved not only in rendering in performance, but in rendering "movingly".

Conor Lovett preparing for the symposium's closing session.

Derval Tubridy also engaged with the intermedial quality of Beckett's work, reflecting on installations and performances of Beckett's work or of works of art inspired by Beckett's *oeuvre*. Tubridy located Beckett as a central figure and a "vital force" for contemporary artists, making the case that theatre and installation art are of the same nature in that they both "provide an environment directed exclusively at the audience." Tubridy contended that Gare St Lazare Ireland's adaptation of Part I of *How It Is* put the viewer in what she called "a forensic relation with Beckett's novel", with "forensic" here meaning "a way of finding how it is." Tubridy's analysis of Miroslaw Balka's *How It Is* installed at the Tate Modern in 2009 revealed how the viewer is physically disempowered by the space. Coming back to Gare St Lazare Ireland's *How It Is Part I* and *Here All Night*, Tubidry suggested that their theatre engages the viewer with performance in a similar fashion as installation art. She argued that such intermedial artistic practices "open a new site for the production of theatre and art" and allows a better understanding of "what is radical in Beckett's prose."

Feargal Whelan closed the panel by exploring the intertwining of the lyrical and the grotesque in *How It Is*. He discussed this stylistic element through the specific intertextual dynamic of Beckett's reading Roger Casement's *Amazon Journal* while writing *Comment c'est*. Whelan framed the lyrical moments of *How It Is* as images interrupting the narrative, arguing that lyrical passages, placed in confrontation with repulsive images, serve as "moments of relief […] puncturing the text's grotesque". For instance, in Part I, Whelan reads the verbena as a pastoral and lyrical element that operates as an interruption of the horror of the mud, but as he showed, the horror returns. Whelan demonstrated that the body, which is constantly affected by the horror, is constitutive of the grotesque of *How It Is*. Whelan identified this process of interruption as a recurrent one in *How It*

Is, terming it "an aesthetics of interruption" and finding there a form of hope which is rendered false by the end of the novel. He argued that this method consisting in the juxtaposition of the beautiful and the horrible came in part from Beckett reading Casement's *Black Diaries*, in which Casement resorts to interruptions to cope with the horror of the stories that he tells. What these interruptions really do, Whelan concluded, is "highlight the unsustainability of the main narrative."

The day's conversations were tied together by a roundtable about staging and performing Beckett's prose led by Professor Lib Taylor, who suggested to rethink ontologically, epistemologically, and empirically academic work as not separable from artistic work. Judy Hegarty Lovett, the director and also a PhD student at the University of Reading, Sarah Jane Scaife, a director and an assistant professor in Trinity College Dublin, and Tom Creed, a theatre and opera director based in Dublin, focused mainly on their own individual experiences of adapting *How It Is, Company* and *Watt*. Scaife and Hegarty Lovett both suggested that the distinction between Beckett's prose and theatre is very thin, the two media being "in constant dialogue" in Scaife's words. The conversation then moved on to the approach of theatre as space. Scaife argued that Beckett's plays are about life and about the body, noting that, when she and Raymond Keane performed Beckett's texts on city streets all over the world, Keane's performances had the power to reveal the wounds of every city where they went, generating an infinite number of frames through which to examine human lives. In turn, Hegarty Lovett observed that she feels more drawn to the prose since the theatre frame is not there, and is interested in site-specific performances which feed on the experimental quality of Beckett's work. In response, Creed shared how, although Barry McGovern began by wearing tails in the staging of *Watt* at the Gate Theatre, the company partly modified his costume and added modern elements in the setting when the play went on tour to allow more emotional intimacy between spectators and performance. Creed felt that the *Watt* performance began "resonating with what was going on in the world" at the time, such as the refugee crisis. While Hegarty Lovett suggested that costumes are written into Beckett's text from her staging of *The End*, Scaife argued that costume in Beckett production tends to come rather from the history of Beckett-directed production, and can usually be modified without contravening the text's actual directions. The roundtable ended on a question from the audience about the position of the estate towards such adaptations and their understanding of contemporary performances of Beckett's prose; Hegarty Lovett responded that Beckett himself gave permission to several companies to stage the prose, and the ensuing discussion revealed that location is vitally important to the response of the estate. As Creed explained, with *Watt* the estate agreed very quickly, being inclined to think that the Gate Theatre will produce Beckett with respect. In the evening, actors Conor Lovett and Stephen Dillane gifted their audience of the day with a work-in-progress performance of *How It Is Part II*, wrapping up the day on a promising note!

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