

Ohio Impromptu, Genre and Beckett on Film

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Samuel Beckett's choice of the title *Ohio Impromptu* to name the play first performed to an audience of academics and scholars at Columbus Ohio in 1981 is one manifestation of its author's interest in the question of literary genre; more generally, in Beckett's dramatic works one encounters a meticulous attention to the activity of categorisation, even if the energy is often directed toward the creation of phantom genres for spectral exemplars. This essay concerns itself with *Ohio Impromptu* in particular because by means of elements specific to this play (including the context in which it was first performed) it comments upon its own very failure to occupy its designated genre co-ordinates (these include its identity both as a play and as an 'impromptu'). This play, which is so apt to incorporate other genres, however, is presided over by a stage direction which locates it firmly in the theatrical context. It is in its deliberate failure to attend to this stage direction that the Beckett on Film version of the play goes beyond the mere treacherous fidelity that is inevitably a feature of any adaptation. In arguing this, the essay analyses the foregrounding in the play of questions that can be said to pertain to genre (in several senses). Its more specific intention is to suggest that, via a combination of casting and special effects, the adaptation succeeds not only in cancelling the critical reflection on the 'genre gesture' that is lodged in *Ohio Impromptu*, but also in eradicating the very disjunction between Reader and Listener upon which the play depends.

In 1979 Jacques Derrida delivered his paper 'La Loi du genre' (Derrida, 1980) to an international colloquium on Genre in Strasbourg; in 1981 Samuel Beckett, on the invitation of the Beckett scholar Stan Gontarski, wrote *Ohio Impromptu* for an audience derived from the delegates attending *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*. It is not only the intervention authored by Beckett that does not belong to the genre of discourse known as the conference address. The paper by Derrida is remarkable for the extent to which, through a deconstructionist manoeuvre, it performs as well as states its topic; in its complex reading of Blanchot's *récit La Folie du jour* (1949/1973) it is simultaneously a statement on genre and a performance at the limit of the genre of conference address, or as Derrida himself puts it:

Submitting myself to the subject of our colloquium, as well as to its law, I have sifted 'A *récit*,' *La Folie du jour*. I have isolated a type, if not a genre of reading from an infinite series of trajectories or possible courses [...] I could not say what exactly has happened in this scene, not in my discourse or my account. What was perhaps seen, in the time of a blink, is a madness of law – and, therefore, of order, reason, sense and meaning, of day. (Derrida, 1992: 251; 1980: 227-8)

For his part Beckett had been asked to write a dramatic piece to be performed to the delegates at the conference devoted to his work. His first instinct was to head in the opposite direction to that taken by Derrida – in a gesture towards conventional conference address and away from drama proper in the form of a monologue delivered to the delegates by a spectral apparition (Beckett in Beja, Gontarski and Astier, 1983). That false start behind him, Beckett eventually settled on a play

which enacts a certain paradoxical relation between literary criticism and its object of scrutiny, wherein exegesis and literature at once fuse and refuse each other. Beckett stages this encounter by means of a series of what will here be referred to as ‘genre gestures’.¹

Derrida’s essay asks: ‘What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination?’ (Derrida, 1992: 225; 1980: 204). More of this paradox later, but in the first instance, genre is to be defined, in the words of Derrida, as ‘the identifiable recurrence of a common trait by which one recognises, or should recognise, a membership in a class’ (1980: 210-11). Participation in a genre, he points out, is inevitable. Literature, art or any discursive text must, Derrida asserts, ‘bear the mark[s] of a genre’, even if these marks be diverse and not necessarily compatible. By genre here Derrida means both classification as, say, a dramatic, or narrative work, or as a novel or a *récit* (the distinction which is at the heart of the analysis the Blanchot text occupying the major part of his essay), and genre in the several other senses in which the term is being employed here.² But he is also addressing the more specific question of the genre gesture, or the classificatory impulse. This is one of those instances of what he has elsewhere, in *Archive Fever*, identified as the archival impulse – the drive to archive (see Derrida, 1996).

Belonging to, or participating in a genre is, then, unavoidable: it is in this respect that the genre gesture is tantamount to law, which in this instance takes the form of a diktat: you will belong to a genre. In this sense, moreover, the genre gesture precedes and antedates any volitional or inaugural act on the part of an author, as it does any hermeneutic action on the part of the reader or viewer of a work of literature, art or film: ‘The mark of belonging need not pass through the consciousness of the author or the reader’ (Derrida, 1992: 230; 1980: 211). Hence, when the author whose genres are addressed here – Samuel Beckett – deliberately makes a genre gesture and calls one of his works a ‘radio play’ or play for television, that gesture does not override what Derrida calls the law of genre. The law of genre however has another side: Derrida asks us to consider that the marks of belonging (the traits that allow generic classification) to a genre do not themselves belong. This gives rise to the formulation that, while there is no genreless text, all texts participate in genre without that participation ever amounting to a belonging (1995: 230; 1980: 212). This is an instance of the characteristic Derridean moment or locus wherein an identification – a closure – is simultaneously prey to a constitutive opening: interiority is contaminated and infiltrated by a constitutive outside. This indeed is the case with the coinage ‘*clusion*’ with its double and paradoxical sense of both inclusion and exclusion.³ Conterminous with this moment is

¹ Writing with literary criticism in mind, David Duff begins his introduction to an anthology of *Modern Genre Theory* (2000) by making an assertion which those working in areas other than literary studies may find a little anachronistic. Genre, he says, has been democratised and redefined. He continues: ‘not only is the term enjoying renewed currency in literary discourse; it also shows signs of becoming a general cultural buzzword, used in contexts increasingly remote from literary criticism, and applied to forms of writing and speech that have little or no relation to literary genres’ (Duff, 2000: 2). In the light of this it is hoped that the present essay – in sticking for the most part to a literary-critical register in the use of the term ‘genre’ – is not found to be too undemocratic and ‘un-redefined’.

² For reasons of space the aspect of genre which includes the question of gender, of what Mary Gerhart has called ‘Genre choices, gender questions’, is addressed briefly in the editorial introduction in this volume. See Gerhart (1992).

³ I am grateful to the audience at the paper upon which the present essay draws and in particular to Brian Caraher for reminding me of the importance of the neologism *clusion*. I am also grateful to

the movement of what he calls 'degenerescence', the failure of genre co-ordinates and of the gesture which installs these.

It is the intention here to ask if Beckett's work is attentive to precisely this paradox, formulated it must be said by Derrida at a very marked and indeed remarked upon (not least by Derrida himself) distance from the work of Beckett.⁴ A second, but allied concern, will also be addressed here through an analysis of the particular case of *Ohio Impromptu*: namely that certain transpositions or adaptations appear to be so inattentive to the consequences of Beckett's genre gestures as to create versions of the work which lose any right to claim participation or belonging to the very genre, or species identified with the name Samuel Beckett.⁵

Beckett declares his interest in the question of genre by means of his decision to classify certain of his works according to their belonging, and often partial- or non-belonging, to a given genre (even if the genre in question is not an established and generally recognised one). Indeed because the genre gesture in Beckett is often aberrant and extraordinary, the identification of the texts in this way constitutes an internal system of classification which works to prohibit their easy classification under the categories of existing and accepted genre categories (Clément, 1994: 111). All of Beckett's works, in their nominal genres, according to Clément, 'ne conservent du genre que le nom, ils ont peu à peu, les livres succèdent aux livres, sapé les fondements mêmes du genre, en rendant la pratique dérisoire, ou seulement nostalgique' (Clément, 1994: 111).⁶ Hence it is possible that the genre classification and the Beckett-generated taxonomy become transitory tools to reveal the resistance of the text to form and order in the shape of hermeneutics, of which genre-based criticism is but one example.

Beckett's corpus of works for the stage is open to classification in several ways. On occasion the author himself makes the classification, as when he states in its subtitle that *Waiting for Godot* is 'a tragi-comedy in two acts'. However, there are many further instances of classification in the Beckettian dramatic corpus, to restrict oneself only to those to which he explicitly draws our

Jeff Collins for reminding me of the various versions of Derrida's text: the original French version and English translation in *Glyph 7* 1980, and in *Critical Inquiry* in 1981, whereas in the perhaps now better known edited version reprinted in *Acts of Literature* (Derrida, 1992), based as this last is on Derrida's own edited version of the essay for publication in *Parages*, certain sections are omitted. See both Caraher and Collins in this volume. In *clusion* 'the limit of the frame or the border of the context always entails a clause of non-closure. The outside penetrates and determines the inside' (Derrida, 1988: 153).

⁴ See Derrida (1992: 60-62) for an account of how he has tried and failed to write something on the work of Beckett.

⁵ The executor of the Estate of Samuel Beckett, the author's nephew Edward Beckett, chose the occasion of a 2003 symposium on the work of Beckett in Sydney to lament the increasing number of adaptations, stagings of prose works and versions of plays which disregard Beckett's stage directions. Thus an attempt was made to close down the production of *Waiting for Godot* (running in tandem with the conference and attended by many of its delegates) directed by Neil Armfield which went against Beckett's stage direction and featured extensive use of music. It is beyond the scope of the present essay to enter this debate – nor to follow up Edward Beckett's suggestion that academics should police aberrant productions – other than to make an attempt to discuss the consequences of a specific deviation which may or may not be in a relationship of fidelity.

⁶ Trans: 'keep of the genre only its name; book after book they have undermined the very foundations of genre, rendering the practise derisory, or merely nostalgic.'

attention by means either of a title or a subtitle.⁷ These instances are not genre denominators in the same way *Godot* is identified as a tragi-comedy. Hence, *Endgame* is 'A play in two acts'; *Act without words I* 'A mime for one player'; *Act without words II* 'A mime for two players'; *The Old Tune* 'An adaptation'; *Come and Go* 'A dramaticule'; *Happy Days* 'A play in two acts'; *All that Fall* 'A play for radio'; *Embers* 'A piece for radio'; *Words and Music* 'A piece for radio'; *Cascando* 'A radio piece for music and voice'; *Play* 'A play in One act'; *Eh Joe* 'A piece for television'; *Ghost Trio* 'A play for television'; and *...but the clouds...* 'A play for television'. In addition, the titles of *Ohio Impromptu*, *A Piece of Monologue*, *Film*, and *Rough for Radio II* include to a greater or lesser degree a genre gesture.

Other dramatic works such as *Play* and *Film*, by means of a ludic manoeuvre, suggest that they might enjoy a complete identification with their genre (see also Clément, 1994: 109). Beckett's foray into film is an example of what Ruby Cohn calls a 'genre-jumping' exercise – but of course genres are already being mixed when what is under scrutiny are plays not for theatre but for radio, and when works staged in theatres are not plays but mimes. Indeed a work such as *Words and Music* is a play for radio which deliberately mixes genres at another level: here literature – if it is a genre or a genre of genres (as in Maurice Blanchot's conception) – mixes with musical composition and dramatic performance, on the radio.⁸ With oddities of classification that identify works as 'roughs' for radio and theatre respectively the received notion of dramatic genres is perhaps suspended entirely; if not it is with the consequence that one invent a new genre or mode which might be described as 'outline' or 'draft': a genre of incompleteness (which has its correlate in the idea of miniaturisation inscribed in another subtitle: 'dramaticule') which lays claim to status as a genre or as the name of a category of work for stage or for radio. Perhaps by virtue of his invention of genres which by their very nature draw attention to the arbitrariness of the constitutive genre gesture, to its evanescence, or to the inadequacy of classification *tout court*, Beckett is participating in a tradition identified by Blanchot when he wrote of works by authors which display – in what remains once they have been 'abandoned' – the wounds of their repeated reworking and their falling short of completion and wholeness (Blanchot, 1993: 53).

As Genette remarks, genre theory (and the taxonomic gestures carried out in the name of genres) is always retrospective, being founded on a false projection into the Greek past (Genette, 1992).⁹ In this respect the Beckett on Film project is an interesting new addition to the range of ways of classifying Beckett's dramatic works, because this new category is a latecomer in every sense: unlike the other ways of classifying the work, this one is not of Beckett's own making; nor is it in any way internal to his oeuvre. The question arises, then, what is one to make of this 'genre', so to speak, of Beckettian work, or work deriving from Beckett's work? The characteristic which these diverse productions share is that their support is film rather than video; these are artefacts whose existence as a finished work is determined by the identity of film as a distinct medium. The present essay cannot dwell on the cluster of questions to which this quasi-generic classification gives rise, but can deal only with a particular facet. For one particular plane of the project is devoted to what turns out to be a genre jumping exercise in more than two dimensions.

⁷ For the purposes of this essay I refer only to the texts in their English versions.

⁸ Blanchot's conception has an affinity with the notion put forward by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy that 'l'absolue littéraire' is a genre of genres. See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1988).

⁹ For more on this see Genette's well-known correction of the long-standing and widespread error of genre commentators in attributing the famous tripartite distinction of epic, lyric and dramatic genres to Aristotle see Genette (1992).

In Beckett's work in general the manner in which individual works bear the mark of genre is sometimes in a fashion with a passing resemblance to the paradoxical distinction (between *récit* and *roman*) at the heart of the analysis of Blanchot in Derrida's essay. For although the addition as a subtitle of *récit* or *roman* (and occasionally the subsequent removal of that generic designator) specifically does not characterise Beckett's work (as it does Blanchot's),¹⁰ one does necessarily confront in his prose works the implicit paratextual distinction between novel and short prose piece, or the names invented for the various non genres included in this category such as 'fizzle' or 'text' (as in *Texts for Nothing*). As for the plays, *Ohio Impromptu* is a crystallisation of Beckett's procedure of a genre gesture accompanied by a sign of 'de-generation' or the generation of a sliding away from genre – a fall from genre. This is a play which, belonging as it does to the category grouping together the 'late plays', shares with its related works an acute attention to aspects that can be said to constitute the 'specificity' of drama as a medium; in this sense it isolates one of the qualities which – in a certain use of the term – enable one to identify it as a genre of literature (theatre) in which 'the actor's body never ceases asserting itself in its material, physiological facticity' (Garner, 1994: 44). The stage directions specify:

L=Listener

R=Reader

As alike in appearance as possible.

Light on table midstage. Rest of stage in darkness. (Beckett, 1986: 445)

Specifically, Beckett's play plays with the idea that two actors, no matter what degree of likeness they embody, and disregarding the extent to which they converge in appearance, always and in advance differ and diverge: they must occupy distinct spatial (and as we shall see temporal) coordinates.¹¹ In short, if one is thought of as a copy of the other, then the first will have preceded him even if in an existence imagined offstage; in an alternative conception, which would take them as two cloned beings separated from their model, their very replication would separate them in space.¹² The situation which the play potentially evokes is that to which philosophy has ceaselessly returned (and which genre theory addresses at quite another level): difference and repetition.¹³

But before addressing directly the problematics of difference and repetition opened by the divided and ruined One of *Ohio Impromptu*, what can be said of the many genres, in the several meanings of that word, staged in the play? Genres staged, commented upon, or evoked? An

¹⁰ *Thomas l'Obscur* began by being identified as a *roman* (Blanchot, 1942) and ended up with all the traits of a *récit* (Blanchot, 1950), aside that is from its being so classified by its author. For more on this see Dowd (1999).

¹¹ The necessity of conformity to, or of matching the 'specifications' of a species or genre, determine the inclusion or exclusion of an individual from that genus. It is perhaps only at this microcosmic level that it is true of Beckett's work that it explores the human condition, despite the many claims made for Beckett's work in this regard, even in the title of the conference to which the play was a contribution.

¹² See Derrida (1971) on the 'anoriginal' structure of mimicry. (I should stress that the term anoriginal is taken from Andrew Benjamin [1993], not Derrida).

¹³ The best and best-known account of the play of difference and repetition in Beckett's work is Connor (1988); see also Abbott (1996) for a critical interrogation of this account. See also Deguy (1992) for a reading of mimesis and repetition reflecting on Aristotle's *Poetics* and Ricoeur (1992) for an account of Aristotle on narrative.

awareness of these can be gleaned by relating something of the *muthos* of the play. Two figures very similar in physical appearance sit at a table at night. R (Reader) reads from a book, the other (L) listens. The only action of the Listener is to knock on the table a total of six times to demand the repetition of a passage of the text being read, an action which on one occasion prompts Reader to depart from his text and utter the word 'Yes'. The narrative as it is revived by R displays characteristics associated with the autobiographical and memoir genres, and concerns two entwined memories, one of them involving walks with a man on the Isle of Swans, the other concerning a relationship with a woman. In both narratives a mood of nostalgia and regret prevails. There is, however, a reflexivity here that cannot be avoided: the narrative account of the past also seems to comment on the occasion of its present rendition. For example, the book from which the Reader reads in the present is in some sense the selfsame worn volume referred to in the narrative. In this way the past narrated in the book and read in the present by the Reader becomes the present. The narrating present moment embodied in the act of Reading, moreover, is already past: Reader's actions, the principal one of which is to come and to read, in the present are subject to a pressure which makes them finished, long since completed. Once the reading has finished in the other sense – once the book on stage has been closed – the two figures remain in silence and the light fades to black.

One can in the first instance make a provisional list of the genres of literary writing that are presented on the basis of relatively immediately identifiable shifts in level. First the framing genre is drama; then there is an embedded prose narrative; this latter can be more precisely classified as belonging to the sub-genre of memoir, or of confessional or autobiographical narrative. Parts, then, of the play can be said to have a connection to non-dramatic genres. This of course is in conformity with the observation familiar to theorists of genre, namely that every genre slides into those other genres by means of which it defines itself, even if it is for that fact alone – that is, that it defines itself by means of an exclusive disjunction.

The play itself, however, is not as easily identified as a drama as one might at first glance believe. Its first audience consisted of 400 conference delegates gathered to hear academics reflect on the purported relation of Beckett to something identified as humanism. The play, it is possible to assert, is not a play, or not only a play. *Ohio Impromptu* is in part a perverse and irreverent conference address; at the very least it takes the place of such an address, while simultaneously standing in for its author in the spotlight of what professed itself to be a humanistic perspective. As a play it is unable entirely to shake off or to erase these duplicitous origins (which in Genette's terms occupy the space known as the paratext). Now Beckett is clearly aware of the ability of the play he wrote to perform this twofold substitution. That this is so is signalled by the decision to name the play *Ohio Impromptu*: the play is thereby stamped with spatio-temporal co-ordinates – the geographical location ('Ohio') and the occasion ('impromptu' for Stan Gontarski and the 1981 conference). Moreover this stamping of the play in such a way as to cause it always to trail behind it a legacy of its inaugural performance has consequences – of which Beckett was only too well aware – for the Beckett scholars who would subsequently come to interpret the play; for those stage directors and actors intent on reviving it; and for those who might later come to the play aiming to adapt it for another media form, or genre.

That, however, is not the full extent of the inscription of a genre problematic. This is not least due to the fact that the very concept of genre is subjected to a disorientation in the play (via a slippage from genre co-ordinates), in the sense that this play does not even belong to its most general category; it is incapable of even this degree of adherence (much like several of Blanchot's *récits* which have a tendency to lose or gain this generic designation as they move through successive editions). Indeed, pulling the optical instrument by means of which one might perform

categorisation back further, does the specimen even belong to literature? After all, this work does not call itself a play, nor even a ‘dramaticule’ – that shrivelled vestige of a play to which Beckett is drawn in another title. It names itself by way of a genre that properly belongs to music (the impromptus of Schubert, Schumann and Chopin being well known to Beckett), not to literature as such (although there are instances in the modern and contemporary period as noted separately by Gontarski, 1982 and McMullan, 1993). Arguably, then, every instance of identification via classification that one might perform upon this play is subject to a de-stabilising force that forestalls the classificatory drive, the drive to archive according to the exercise of what Derrida calls the ‘hermeneutic right and competence’ (Derrida, 1996: 2). (Both prospective and retrospective adherence to genre designators are problematised.) For, as the splendid example of Borges shows, just because there is a species of creature, examples of which, ‘*de lejos parecen moscas*’ (‘from a long way off, look like flies’), does not mean that the creatures in question are flies (Borges, 1952: 124). Moreover, it is quite likely that those fabulous beasts belonging to this category of from-a-long-way-off-resembling-flies do not themselves form a genus, other, that is, than a genus defined by its resemblance to another genus. Even their identification when arrived at by an observer or instrument measuring them against that genus will only corroborate the genus identified in advance as the standard or model. In short the category of from-a-long-way-off-resembling-flies is not a genre; if so it is an absurd and exorbitant genre, an a-generic genre. The same is true of Beckett’s play, conference mal-address, still-born impromptu, withheld gift: from a long way off, whether measured in time (say, from the vantage point of the year 2004) or in space (from the back of the conference theatre in Ohio) it may resemble a play, but yet it is not really a play, not entirely a play. *Ohio Impromptu* does not belong where it purported to be located; it was never quite there; it will always remain somewhat exorbitant.

The genre gestures however are even more pervasive than this would suggest. If we follow Jean-François Lyotard in understanding genre as ‘genre of discourse’ (Lyotard, 1988), then, as many commentators on the play are swift to point out, in *Ohio*’s ‘characterisation’ there is the self-reflexive interrogation of the genre of literary criticism (commentary) or hermeneutics: *face-à-face* the play presents a reader and a receiver-interpreter.¹⁴ The two roles demand that one sees and hears on stage two genres of discourse at work (or at play): literary criticism and literature itself. If these are genres which are, to employ a Leibnizean term, ‘impossible’ – L can only make R stop, elide, and return or repeat, what he cannot do is make it mean any more or less than it does – with one of them reduced to near silence (and to a total silence as far as verbalisation is concerned), in Lyotard’s terms what the play can be said to stage is a differend between literature or writing and critical exegesis. These two – like R and L – resemble each other so much and yet refuse each other (the subtext of Derrida’s statement on not reading Beckett, which for him means not writing on Beckett). From a long way off they might be said to be the same, but close up they do not belong to each other; they are not even related.

Another possible reading would attest to the mixing of genres that contravenes the prohibition mentioned at the beginning of Derrida’s essay: ‘*ne pas mêler les genres*’ (Derrida, 1980: 176). The table on the stage in Ohio becomes a mixing table via which spectral voices representing literature and literary criticism respectively are overlaid one upon the other: from the Latin Quarter hat which is positioned on that table is summoned the author of *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce [1939] 1977) who famously wore one very like it (literature), while the conjunction of reader and interpreter furnishes an undeniable echo of the origins of Beckett’s reading of that particular work

¹⁴ Reading has a special place in the ethics of the *différend* according to Lyotard (see Lyotard, 1988). For more on Lyotard’s philosophy as a genre see Crowell 1991.

in progress in his essay ‘Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce’ ([Beckett 1929] literary criticism).¹⁵ However, these autobiographemes could equally direct one to the genres of writing and of interpretation, and to the limit which the play itself is attempting to touch.

The second genre however is mute: criticism and interpretation do not speak in *Ohio Impromptu*: only the work speaks; all that can be heard is the murmur of the *neutre* as identified by Blanchot (Blanchot, 1955: 56). Yet simultaneously both speaking and listening functions are, as it were, switched on by Beckett and he plays them alongside one another.

When, however, it was adapted for screen under the umbrella of the Beckett on Film project (in a version starring Jeremy Irons) two important alterations are made to Beckett’s stage directions. As a direct consequence of these changes, far from being an instance of the very mixing of genres that Derrida’s paradoxical law of genre would advocate as integral to the act of generic classification in the first place, and contrary to the ‘degenerescence’ of genre distinctions which Beckett’s work promotes, *Ohio Impromptu* on film in fact excises the traces, precisely, of contamination. It does so by forcing Beckett’s play in a direction to which – if its stage directions are respected – it is fundamentally resistant. In place of the ‘degenerescence’ (and the ‘formlessness’) at work in the play for theatre, the version for television generates a form and reinstates the problematic diktat identified by Derrida at the start of his essay: ‘ne pas mêler les genres’ (‘genres are not to be mixed’, Derrida, 1980: 202; 1992: 223).¹⁶

The first significant departure is the use of Jeremy Irons in both roles, the second the fading out of the reader at the end of the film. Both departures of course are made possible by characteristics specific to film as a medium and would be impossible to achieve in stage drama. The first departure can be suggested (as in Beckett’s stage directions concerning the similarity in appearance of R and L) on stage but not actualised. The second could be suggested by means of lighting effect or a certain use of the stage set. The point is however that neither the duplication nor the selective fade is authorised by Beckett. It is the contention of this essay that the combination serves to deprive the play of some of its core concerns, not least its micro-textual reflection on the question of genre.

Ohio fades

In giving his play the title *Ohio Impromptu* Beckett makes what is perhaps his most corrosive genre gesture: the event that it names does not arrive, cannot arrive, other than in its non-arrival, its non-self-coincidence at the Beckett conference in Ohio. In the play itself the theme of non-arrival is also addressed. It is the book on the table lying between the Listener and the Reader that is the archive of this non-arrival, just as it is the archive of their own non-coincidence.¹⁷ Thus Beckett’s characters

¹⁵ Beckett confirmed to his biographer James Knowlson that he had in mind Joyce, both in the form of the hat and of the anecdote about the Île des Cygnes (Knowlson, 1992: 665). The fact that Beckett functioned as Joyce’s secretary for a time, writing passages of the work in progress dictated by Joyce is, as many have been swift to remark, another autobiographeme that is difficult to avoid. In an irresistible coincidence, as far as the present essay is concerned, Derrida’s essay on Joyce makes much of Joyce’s ‘marking’ of Ohio in *Ulysses* (Derrida, 1992: 271, Joyce, [1922] 1960: 129).

¹⁶ For Derrida’s comments on degenerescence and formlessness see Derrida (1980).

¹⁷ Just as the book is an index of the non-coincidence of R and L, so also is it the trace of what Deguy, in his reading of Aristotle, identifies as the relation between *techne* and nature: ‘La mimesis est au centre, verbalement, d’une des plus illustres sentences: *He tekhnē mimeitai ten phusin*; au centre comme le mot de la relation; c’est la Relation qui est dite, le “au commencement était la Relation”. Le faire de la mimesis, et son contrefaire, fraye la relation, et “dépose”, au deux poles,

testify, to borrow the words of Blanchot from the year before *Ohio Impromptu*, that the event is ‘the advent of what does not happen, of what comes without arriving, outside being, and as though drifting away’ (Blanchot, 1986: 5). The book is on the one hand a bond between them, but it is also simultaneously that which separates them.¹⁸ Any questions of chronological priority pertaining to either character must go through the complex detour of the archive represented by the book from which the Reader reads; while any sense in which the Listener precedes the Reader is thereby undermined by what Abbot correctly identifies as the Möbius strip effect of the embedded narrative (Abbott, 1996: 175). It is an effect which makes it impossible to disentangle the haunter from the haunted, so that if, as Derrida asserts, ‘*Le spectre, ce n’est pas simplement quelqu’un que nous voyons venir revenir, c’est quelqu’un par qui nous sentons regardés, observés, surveillés*’ (Derrida, 1995: 135), the play establishes the possibility of a double spectrality, a stereospectrality.¹⁹ This structure of double and reversible haunting is ousted in the Beckett on Film version; the paradox of waiting in Beckett’s work is thereby rendered in such a way as to fit into a comfortable teleological template (which is simultaneously a mimetic template). The fade-out makes the Reader merely a ghost, a memory or a subconscious – a Platonic ‘descendant’ of the ‘ascendant’ Listener. In its seeking out of this ‘ground’ or foundation, the screen version deprives the play of its bodies plural and dispersed, a structure which it replaces by having two host bodies inhering in one stellar personage (Jeremy Irons). While there is on screen a representation of two bodies, the director installs a Platonic hierarchy of form and copy, and even makes the copy slip into a simulacrum, by simply fading it away: a question of degrees of belonging to the stellar person of Jeremy Irons. Moreover, in filming a disappearance not part of Beckett’s play – in making the book and the Reader disappear together – the director absorbs the destabilising temporal effects created by Beckett and re-orders temporality into an unproblematic linearity.

The State of Ohio Address²⁰

The non-belonging to genre which Beckett remarks upon in his title and which, by virtue of his stage directions and intended casting he underlines, and seeks to reinforce, may in the end have an affinity with the statement about the abeyance of genre in the neutrality and passivity named by Blanchot ‘literature’ or the Book. Perhaps the various genres laid bare on the table of *Ohio Impromptu* – critical exegesis (it should be recalled that the play is performed to academics attending

de l’art (*tekhne*) et de la nature (*phusis*)’ (Deguy, 1992: 326); trans: ‘Mimesis is verbally at the centre of one of the most illustrious sentences: *He tekhne mimeitai ten phusin*; at the centre like the word of relation, it is Relation that is stated, the “in the beginning was Relation”. The making of mimesis and its unmaking opens up relation and “deposits” art (*tekhne*) and nature (*phusis*) at two poles.’

¹⁸ In Leibniz’s monadology the degree to which a zone of clarity predominates in a monad is indexical of the degree of its perfection. Every monad has an obscure zone, and shares transmonadically in this obscurity. It only falls to some monads to accede to the clarity and light of an enhanced clear zone. See Leibniz 1983.

¹⁹ Trans.: ‘The spectre is not simply someone whom we see returning; it is, rather, someone by whom we sense ourselves being watched, observed and under surveillance.’

²⁰ In the holograph text reprinted in Beja, Gontarski and Astier Beckett jokes about ‘the state of Ohio’.

a conference), autobiography, memoir²¹ – all subside in the movement of slippage from co-ordinates that is literature or the Book. Blanchot sums up the characteristics of this genre-smashing phenomenon in the following terms (it must be underlined that genre and classification are explicitly addressed by Blanchot in the paragraphs from which the quotation is taken):

A preoccupation...which never directly reveals, confirms or justifies itself, which one only approaches by turning away from it, which one only grasps when one goes beyond it, in a pursuit which must in no way be concerned with literature, with what it 'essentially' is, but which, on the contrary, is concerned with diminishing it, neutralising it, or, more accurately, with descending, in a movement which ultimately eludes and disregards it, to a point where all that seems to speak is impersonal neutrality. (Blanchot, 1995: 141)

The Book is linked to the concept in Blanchot which names the interminable awaiting, the non-arrival at or attainment of the goal, the non-arrival of dawn. The vigil as it functions in the thought of Blanchot necessarily falls short of the goal of illumination, revealing, or *alethia*. The night vigil of *Ohio Impromptu* as Beckett intended it to be staged is resonant both of Blanchot's conception of the book to come, and of Derrida's reflection on the non-arrival of genre in 'La loi du genre':

This axiom of non-closure or non-fulfilment [*clusion*] enfolds within itself the condition for the possibility and the impossibility of taxonomy. This inclusion and exclusion do not remain exterior to one another; they do not exclude each other. But neither are they immanent or identical to each other. They are neither one nor two...The clause or floodgate of genre declasses what it allows to be classed. It tolls the death knell of genealogy or genericity, which it however also brings forth to the light of day. Putting to death the very thing that it engenders, it cuts a strange figure; a formless form, it remains nearly invisible, it neither sees the day nor brings itself to light. (Derrida, 1992: 231; 1980: 213)

The act of holding the play within the orbit of its theatrical specificity alone, as marked and remarked in Beckett's stage directions, enables *Ohio Impromptu* to maintain the vigil it seems to perform in a manner close to the concepts of Blanchot and Derrida. At one level this exigency might motivate the conclusion that there has only ever been one (solicited but impossible) performance of *Ohio Impromptu*; at another it might mean that certain stagings or indeed screen versions to come of the play might approach what Beckett achieved in this first and/or only performance.

To conclude, it is necessary to mention the possibility that if genre co-ordinates tend to be presented in Beckett the better that they are subject to ruination, and if he is a willing participant in this failure, then there might be some scope for suggesting that in the very works themselves there is an implicit sanction for departures from the letter of his text, for relocations, recontextualisations, in short for a comprehensive de-generation in part bequeathed to us by Beckett himself. However, as the case of *Ohio Impromptu* reveals, Beckett's genre gesture writes in advance against the deviations from his text made by the Beckett on Film version and hence undermines them. In its removal of two elements central to the performance of the play's embedded reflection on genre and genericity, the screen version becomes merely a film about,

²¹ Beckett confided to one of his biographers, James Knowlson, that the woman with the 'dear name' was evoked by Beckett's wife Suzanne and that the walks on the Île des Cygnes were intended to allude to Joyce (Knowlson, 1996: 665-6).

rather than a film version or adaptation of, *Ohio Impromptu*.²² Finally it is even possible to read the film as an attempt to resurrect the Beckett play in line with the 'humanistic perspective' agenda of the conference at which it was first staged; but whereas the conference happily hosted the non-belonging to the *genre humain* (human species) which the Ohio stage marked and remarked upon, the film restores the pure, unmixed species to centre stage.

²² In a companion piece to the present essay I have elsewhere explored at more length the complex relation of the Beckett on Film version to Beckett's play proper. See Dowd 2003.

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