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Ecology in Beckett's Theatre Garden: Or How to Cultivate the Oikos

In an Introduction, co-written with my colleague and friend Clare Finburgh, for the publication *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage* (2015), I suggested that the work of the playwrights loosely associated with Martin Esslin's problematic category, the Theatre of the Absurd, might be rethought historically rather than existentially. This led me to claim that so-called absurdist writers (whose names include Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter) were able to articulate a 'structure of historical feeling',¹ in Raymond Williams' understanding of the term, that was characterised by a nascent but deeply felt sense of anxiety regarding an impending form of ecological crisis.² In my reading, the anxiety was dependent upon two factors. First, the explosion of the two atom bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, quickly followed by the invisible terrors of radiation sickness, cancers, and birth defects in the bodies of survivors; and second, the appearance of new modes of ecological knowledge that came into being in the 1950s, and which were popularised by Rachel Carson's eco-best-seller, *Silent Spring* (1962), a text that highlighted the disastrous effects of chemical pesticides on bird populations as

¹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 128-35.

² Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh 'Introduction: Greening the Absurd', in *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, Environment and the 'Greening' of the Modern Stage*, ed. by Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 1-58 (pp.16-17).

well as on the larger ecosystem in general. The great irony, here, of course, is that many of the playwrights associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, in particular Samuel Beckett, rejected naturalist depictions of history altogether. Paradoxically, by deliberately constructing his work so that it could occupy what philosopher Peter Osborne, after Gilles Deleuze, has called 'any-space-whatever',³ Beckett has arguably proved the most historically astute and adaptable of all twentieth-century playwrights; the one whose work foreshadows, darkly, the general and specific dilemmas of our own environmentally troubled age, the playwright who, to use Alan Read's language, continues to irritate us, having the ability to get under our skin.⁴

But what does this irritation consist of, and why does it affect us in the age of what many geologists and climate scientists are now calling the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch in which western modernity has embedded itself, into the very rock strata of the planet as a result of industrialisation, nuclear testing and the burning of fossil fuels?⁵ Possibly because, as I wager in this article, Beckett's plays purposefully set out to deconstruct the teleological triumphalism inherent in some narratives about the Anthropocene. In Beckett's hands, theatre is no longer a space where the essence

³ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 149.

⁴ Alan Read, *Theatre in the Expanded Field: Seven Approaches to Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. xix.

⁵ As well as changing the geomorphology of the earth through drilling and excavation practices, the industrial processes of capitalist modernity have increased the amount of carbon in the atmosphere and so warmed the planet, which, in turn, has impacted on tectonic plate movements. They have also left trace elements in sand, rock, and soils through toxic sludge and other forms of chemical pollution. Even the most remote places on earth, areas once designated as wilderness, now show signs of human interference through the presence of airborne particles in soil sediments.

of the human appears; on the contrary, it is a site where the human dis-appears, subjected, as it is, to a series of 'more than human' flows and temporal processes that challenge its much-vaunted exceptionalism and apparent omniscience. To be a spectator at a Beckett play is to find oneself overwhelmed by the shimmering presence of a strange and estranging world, a world that no longer makes linguistic sense, and where the dangerous binary between 'nature' and culture is troubled, without, for all that, ever being dissolved completely.⁶

In order to unearth the ecological potential that remains latent in the temporal and affective aspects of Beckett's work, I propose, in this article, to adopt an oblique method of approach. Instead of engaging in direct analysis, in simply displaying the textual evidence for my claims and parcelling out knowledge, I intend to read Beckett's theatre indirectly through the metaphor of a garden. The reason behind this figural move is to find a new way of engaging with the ecological affects of Beckett's theatre, the sense in which, as in a garden, actors and spectators are subjected to a kind of 'weathering', to the elemental impress of time. The overall objective is to offer an alternative approach to the ecological dimension of Beckett's theatre that draws on two, as of yet, divergent strands of contemporary Beckett scholarship – namely, the ecocritical and the phenomenological or haptic. Additionally, I am concerned with how we might write ecological affect in response to Beckett's plays, a stylistic ambition that necessitates a different form of theatre criticism by experimenting with a subjective register of discourse. For if, as I argue below, Beckett's work insists on

⁶ This attempt to undo binaries and exclusions resonates with Bruno Latour's critique of modernity in *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

a mode of embodied participation, in which spectators are included in the event, the only way to capture the affective charge of that experience in writing is to fashion metaphors, images and rhythms as much as ideas, concepts and terminologies.

Ecology

Given its relative marginality, to date, within the disciplines of Theatre and Performance Studies, it seems important, from the outset, to qualify my comments on ecology, and to define how I seek to use it in conjunction with Beckett's theatre. The first point to note is that ecology is not necessarily about 'nature' (whatever that means) and neither is it limited to a scientific or cybernetic study of a given ecosystem or communication network.⁷ Rather, as I use it, ecology is a mode of operating that seeks connections, and which attempts to problematise, without ever collapsing, the borders between the human and non-human, the *socius and bios*.⁸ Ecology then is a marginal discourse by itself, a discourse of the in-between, the composite: it fluctuates, swerves, and troubles. Crucially, it is also a discourse about what it means to be at home. In its etymology, for instance, ecology is a word that derives from the combination of the Greek prefix *oikos* (home, house or hearth) with the suffix *logos* (law, order, economy). In a literal sense, then, to be ecological is to engage in what the eco-

⁷ This is close to Timothy Morton's argument in *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). It also explains why nature in this article is always placed in inverted commas.

⁸ For more on how ecological thinking is a thinking of connection, see Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 1.

critic and poet Wendell Berry calls 'home economics',⁹ a practice that would, from Berry's perspective at least, privilege planning, the management of supply and demand, and the return to equilibrium - all things that policy makers and government think-tanks are so concerned to quantify and centralise.

While I want to keep the etymological link that would tie ecology to a thinking about home and homecoming in this article, my understanding and usage of the term differs, quite radically, from Berry's; and we could say, for that matter, from much of the first wave of ecocritical writing, which relied heavily on Heideggerian notions of dwelling and homecoming. In my understanding, by contrast, ecology is a mode of operating that troubles the contours of the human subject by revealing the extent to which the entwined concepts of homecoming and dwelling are not only philosophically dubious but environmentally and socially harmful. This is because such thinking tends to place the subject at the very centre of the world by assuming that the human being is the only creature that can dwell poetically.¹⁰ There is nothing, for instance, in Heidegger's discourse of dwelling to suggest that the earth has its own autonomy, and/or that 'nature' is something that dominates us as opposed to being something that we are charged to care for. Ultimately, an ecology founded on a dwelling-perspective is unable to respect the alterity of the earth, the fact that it does not exist for 'us', so to speak. Additionally, such a philosophy offers little help in allowing us to live in a world that very obviously and directly questions human

⁹ Wendell Berry, *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1987), pp. 54-75.

¹⁰ In this context, see Carl Lavery and Simon Whitehead's critique of Heideggerian-inspired eco-criticism, 'Bringing It All Back Home: Towards an Ecology of Place', *Performance Research*, 17: 4 (2012), 111-19.

supremacy, such as we saw, for example, in the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 or the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. The difficulty with an ecology of dwelling is that it can transform, quickly, into an ecology of despair and rage in those moments when the world refuses to play a subservient role in the human drama.

Instead then of an ecology that surreptitiously seeks to master the earth, I want to argue for an *oikology* that undoes the human subject by placing it – *the anthropos* - in an immanent world that it is unable to dominate. From this perspective, homecoming, the search for the *oikos*, would be a paradoxical process, something that is doomed, in advance, to failure, a realisation that human being, *contra* its designated place in western metaphysics, is always a deferred or impossible being. In ecological terms - and this is why Beckett's work is so important - there might be more to be learnt in accepting our absence than in clinging to our presence.

My understanding of ecology draws much from the thinking of Jean-François Lyotard who, in his late work - especially the collection of essays *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1992) – posited the *oikos* as something that was fundamentally opposed to economic and cybernetic systems as well as to metaphysical values.¹¹ Playing on the etymological root that links ecology with economics (*oikonimikos* or *oikonomikon*), and which he associates with the 'public sphere', Lyotard proceeds to offer an unconventional and ontological reading of the *oikos* that emphasises its strangeness, privacy and resistance to communication:

¹¹ For a reading of Harold's Pinter drama through Lyotard's notion of the *oikos*, see Mark Taylor-Batty and Carl Lavery, 'The Secluded Voice: The Impossible Call Home in Early Pinter', in *Rethinking The Theatre of Absurd*, ed. by Lavery and Finburgh, pp. 219-40.

I simply mean that, for me, 'ecology' means the discourse of the secluded, of the thing that has not become public, that has not become communicational, that has not become systemic, and that can never be any of these things.¹²

For Lyotard, the *oikos* is absolutely not a place where one can dwell; it lies beyond representation and cognition as a shadow, a secret, something working away at the centre of identity, undoing it, making us marginal to ourselves:

My *oikeion* is an otherness that is not an *Umwelt* at all, but this otherness is in the core of the apparatus. We have to imagine an apparatus inhabited by a sort of guest, not a ghost, but an ignored guest who produces some trouble, and people look to the outside to find out the external cause of the trouble. But probably the cause is not outside at all. [...] That is the reason why I connect...this topic of the *oikeion* with a writing that is not knowledge at all and that has, properly speaking, no function.¹³

To be ecological in a progressive sense, Lyotard believes, is not, then, in the first instance, to turn towards the *Umwelt* or outside environment. On the contrary, it centres on the human being's capacity to find a way of living with this internal alterity, this ignored guest that troubles us, but which we can never transcend because it constitutes the paradoxical core of our humanity. As Lyotard puts it in a different text the destiny of 'humankind...is to be inhabited by the inhuman'.¹⁴ Lyotard's understanding of ecology is important. Not only does it problematise the utopianism or naivety in most systems-based theories of ecology, in which human beings are supposed to renounce their identity with ease, it also undoes arrogant ideas about human exceptionalism that one finds in Enlightenment

¹² Jean-François Lyotard, 'Oikos' in *Political Writings*, trans. by Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman (London: UCL Press, 1993), pp 96-107 (p.105).

¹³ Ibid, p.102.

¹⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 2.

concepts of subjectivity. For all its similarity with Lacanian notions of the real, Lyotard does not believe that one can banish the inhuman from the human.¹⁵ On the contrary, and paradoxically, the inhuman, for him, forms the core of the human, that 'thing' within us that links us to 'nature' and which transforms human existence into an experiment in/with immanence. The inhuman, in other words, is a marker of what we might see as our 'creatureliness', something which ties us to the fate and destiny of the planet itself, and which undoes the absolute binary that anthropocentric thinking draws between culture and 'nature'. Lyotard's theory of 'nature' is rooted in division, becoming and bifurcation. As opposed to the standard Romantic vision that emerges from Fichte and Hegel, there is no possibility, for Lyotard, of ever returning to a fixed origin or of re-establishing some lost harmony within the natural world. The best we can do is to try to accommodate ourselves to the anarchic 'unhomeliness' of the *oikos*, to give it a space to emerge. But there is no guarantee of success. Everything remains indeterminate and contingent.

Lyotard's view of ecology as a way of learning to live with the inhuman, both within the world at large and within the structures of subjectivity itself, has important consequences for how one might conceive of the ecological value of art, and in this specific instance, theatre. For if ecology is about allowing a space for irrecoverable strangeness to emerge (if not to speak), then ecological artworks have little to do, necessarily, with the representation of 'nature' or with engaging, directly and actively, in issues to do with environmental justice, such

¹⁵ Lacan seeks to do this by positing the human subject as a speaking being, someone whose unconscious is always structured like a language, and whose fall out of language into the real is synonymous with trauma and psychosis.

as climate change, species extinction, sustainability, resilience. On the contrary, the most ecologically valid artworks may be those that allow a space for the inhuman to appear in the very realm (art) where human existence has traditionally been thought to find its most essential expression.

With regard to theatre, this means renouncing western drama's traditional obsession with reflection, and fashioning, instead, a mode of performance that would show spectators not what *they are* but what *they are not*. In concrete terms, this would be a theatre where Aristotelian dramaturgies, with their focus on constructing coherent dramatic actions unfolding in a linear pattern towards a designated end or *telos*, would be replaced with a subtractive theatre where time becomes a palpable and problematic force. The point, here, is not to represent an action but to create an affective discharge, to engage in what we call after Beckett 'nerve work'.¹⁶ For, as Lyotard remarks, the *oikos*, the inhuman, is beyond cognition. We know it because we feel it in our bodies, because it touches us, because we are in it, like Lucky's speech in *Waiting for Godot* (1953) or the buzzing voice in *Not I* (1972). As such, and from this, I want to propose that theatre's ecological significance resides in the material charge of the theatrical medium itself, in the way in which an affective dramaturgical sculpting of time and space has the potential to disorder and reorder perception to the point where we are able to welcome in the troublesome guest, the *oikos*. This is a theatre, then, like Beckett's, which, to cite Elinor Fuchs, 'no longer defines itself, spatially, against an unseen outside', but which is best understood

¹⁶ This refers to Beckett's letter to the actress Jessica Tandy in which he explained that *Not I* is 'to work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect.' See Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 23.

as a heterotopia or counter-site whose very presence throws the reality of the so-called real world into doubt.¹⁷ Which is precisely why I want to think of theatre in this essay not so much as a house but as a garden, a milieu in which our 'becoming inhuman' is cultivated.

Beckett, Ecocriticism and Ecology

Such an immanent way of thinking about theatre transforms the way in which existing ecological readings of Beckett's work have tended to proceed, even when some of these readings, such as Theodor Adorno's, predate the arrival of ecocriticism on to the critical stage. In his complex 1958 essay 'Trying To Understand *Endgame*', Adorno proposes that Beckett's ecological importance is implicitly found in how he critiques 'the permanent catastrophe' that humanity has inflicted on the planet and on itself during the twentieth century. For Adorno, this is due to a constellation of historical events: the Holocaust, the development of a nuclear arsenal and ensuing arms race during the Cold War, and, in more general terms, by capitalism's complete reification of the world. In Adorno's view, Beckett shows us what it means to live in a world without nature, a world where no seeds sprout, a biosphere in ruins:

In Beckett, history devours existentialism.... After the Second World War, everything is destroyed...; humanity vegetates along, crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one's battered state.¹⁸

¹⁷ Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater After Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 93.

¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, 'Trying to Understand Endgame', trans. by M. T. Jones, *New German Critique*, 26 (1982), 119-50 (p. 122).

The contemporary ecocritic Greg Garrard adopts a similar tone to Adorno, but takes a different path, influenced, no doubt, by a fundamental shift in the object of environmental anxiety from nuclear catastrophe to climate change. As he has it, *Endgame* (1957) is a perfect play for a culture such as ours that is facing the uncertainties of climate change and species extinction. In Garrard's reading, *Endgame* does not so much foreshadow the end of the world, as point towards a world that we are now currently living in, a world where the catastrophe has already happened, a world of limited resources that are running out, a Malthusian world. The horror of *Endgame* then is not about disappearance, for Garrard, but about endurance, the terror of living in a damaged, lifeless *Umwelt* where nothing changes or grows, the endless recurrence of the same, listless grey black-grey horizon:

Endgame is literally, though not clearly, about both the end – of nature ‘in the vicinity’ of comfort, of kindness, of some semblance of peace or equality – and the grim elusiveness of any such reassuring finality.... Worse than the thought that ‘it must be nearly finished’ might be the hideous actuality of endurance.¹⁹

The critical readings proposed by Garrard and Adorno ²⁰are certainly in tune with Beckett's own desire to find a ‘form that accommodates the mess’ of

¹⁹ Greg Garrard, ‘*Endgame: Beckett's Ecological Thought*’, in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd' hui 23*, ed. by Yann Méval, Dominique Rabaté and Sjef Houpermans (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 383-97 (p. 395).

²⁰ Samuel Beckett in an interview with Tom Driver, 1961, quoted in S.E. Gontarski, ‘Introduction: Towards a Minoritarian Criticism – The Questions We Ask’ in *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 1-16 (p. 13).

the twentieth century.²¹ And, it is telling from an ecological perspective, that Beckett, perhaps thinking of the Torrey Canyon oil spill off the coast of Cornwall in 1967, described Winnie in his 1971 production of *Happy Days* in Berlin ‘as a bird with oil on its feathers’.²² Arguably, even more so than in *Endgame*, *Happy Days* (1961), with its burning sun, allusions to fire storms and skin melting,²³ as well as the key line about the earth losing its ‘atmosphere’, seems to take place in a planet without an ozone layer, a planet under threat.²⁴ By deliberately refusing to invest in historically specific images, by keeping, that is, things strange and nebulous, Beckett appears to predict the environmental chaos that we are in today. Winnie’s surreal burial in a patch of scorched earth is revealing, in this context. For what the image communicates, albeit silently and evocatively, is the dark underside of ‘anthropocene knowledge’ – knowledge that realises, all too well, that we are part of and dependent on the earth, no more so, indeed, than when we try to transcend it through technology. This contemporary meaning of the play is surely what is at stake in the striking scenography of Blandine Savetier’s production of the play at the Comédie de Béthune in 2011. Here a peroxidised Winnie, played by Natalie Royer, is entombed in a mound of black polythene bin liners that bring to mind images of the terrible ‘Trash Vortex’, a

²¹ For other ecocritical readings of Beckett, see Paul Davies. ‘Strange Weather: Beckett from the Perspective of Ecocriticism’, in *Beckett After Beckett*, ed. by S.E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (Gainesville: University of Florida Press 2006), pp. 66-78; and Paul Saunders, ‘Samuel Beckett’s Trilogy and the Ecology of Negation’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 20: 1 (2011), 54-77.

²² James Knowlson, ‘Beckett as Director: The Manuscript Notebooks and Critical Interpretation’ in *Modernism in European Drama: Ibsen, Strindberg, Pirandello, Beckett* ed. by Christopher Innes and Frederick J. Marker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), pp.212-227 (p. 220).

²³ Samuel Beckett, ‘Happy Days’ in *Samuel Beckett The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1990), p. 154. All further references to the plays will use this source.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 161.

gyre-like garbage dump that circulates endlessly in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and which is composed of man-made plastics and toxic chemicals.²⁵ Without ever making a direct allusion to the world, the image in *Happy Days* appears to think almost by itself, producing ecological connections and contexts, jumping backwards and forwards and to the side, but always, I think, reminding us, in some oblique but tangible way, of our interdependency, that there is no way of escaping – of exiting – the world. As Hamm puts it in *Endgame*: ‘You’re on earth, there’s no cure for that’.²⁶

These ecological readings of Beckett’s theatre, for all their relevance, remain at the level of the symbolic. They alert us to hidden possibilities – hermeneutic possibilities - within the dramatic text, and are founded, ultimately, on a logic of representation, a sign economy that points to an outside world that spectators recognise and make sense of. But what happens if we shift the focus of our attention, and think of Beckett’s work not so much in terms of ecological hermeneutics but rather as an ecological practice in and by itself? The first point to note is how this turn from text to performance, from representation to affect resonates with the work of critics such as Anna McMullan (2010), Colin Gardner (2012), Trish McTighe (2013), and Stan Gontarski (2015), who, in their different ways, are interested in the haptic or sensate quality of Beckett’s plays.²⁷ For

²⁵ The size of the Trash Vortex is open to debate. Some reports believe it to be the size of Texas, others contend that it is more comparable to the United States of America.

²⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 118.

²⁷ Anna McMullan, *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett’s Drama* (London: Routledge, 2010); Colin Gardner, *Beckett, Deleuze and the Televisual Event: Peephole Art* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Trish McTighe, *The Haptic Aesthetic in Samuel Beckett’s Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and S.E. Gontarski, ‘Samuel Beckett in the Idea of Theatre’, in *The New*

these critics, all of whom are influenced, in one way or another, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze, the significance of Beckett's theatre is not found in making us think, but in making us feel, in how it challenges dominant models of knowledge, perception and perspective. McTighe, for instance, points out that, "haptic" in Beckett's work does not only indicate contact and connection, it also describes disruption of space, time, and bodies, imaged in the formal structures that surround them'.²⁸ And in the 'Introduction' to *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett's Drama*, McMullan states that:

In an era in which commodified and technologized visual culture disseminates phantasmatic corporealities, [Beckett's] presentation of derogated, vulnerable bodies that struggle to appear and to speak continues to pose a challenge to contemporary culture and performance.²⁹

Although no explicit ecocritical agenda is adumbrated by any of the critics mentioned above, the attention they accord affect offers productive insights for thinking through the ecological potential inherent in Beckett's theatre. In order, then, to tease out what that potential might be, and in the hope of bringing two different approaches to Beckett's work into a generative alignment for the first time, I propose, for the remainder of this article, to read Beckett's theatre metaphorically as a garden, a site where presentation is more important than representation and where the exceptional status of the human is placed in crisis.

Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett, ed. by Dirk Van Hulle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 126-42.

²⁸ McTighe, *The Haptic Aesthetic*, p. 8.

²⁹ McMullan, *Performing Embodiment*, p. 1.

But first, a word of caution. When I speak of exploring Beckett's theatre garden, I am not concerned with biographical details (Beckett's famous trouble with moles at his modest house in Ussy for example),³⁰ and neither am I much interested in teasing out specific references to flowers or weather in his work, such, as say, in *Endgame*, when Hamm dreams of 'Pomona' and 'Ceres', somewhere 'beyond the hills', where it is, perhaps, 'still green'.³¹ Likewise, I have no desire to argue for a site-specific staging of Beckett's work in actual gardens. On the contrary, I am more preoccupied with reconfiguring theatre's architectural function as a site or location that has been subtracted, cut out, from the flux and continuity of the world, and provided with walls, an enclosure of sorts, that would somehow mark it off from the chaos of everyday life. The point of this enclosure, as I see it, is not to reject or deny the world in an act of spurious aesthetic autonomy, but to find another way of engaging with it, of producing a sense of difference, an alternative spatio-temporal rhythm, perhaps. In Beckett's theatre garden, theatre is no longer the space for looking; it is a *sensorium*, a space where we are affected, corporeally, by the stuff that is placed in it, landscaped we might even say. Finally, in contrast to Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964),³² his classic study of how literature responded to industrialism's destruction of pastoralism in the US in the nineteenth century, Beckett's garden shows no

³⁰ For more on Beckett's troubles with moles and wild boars in his garden, see James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), pp. 460-61.

³¹ Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 111. See also Winnie's reference to 'the back garden at Borough Green' in *Happy Days*, p. 142.

³² Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

nostalgia for a lost wilderness.³³ Like land artist Robert Smithson, Beckett knows that 'there is no escape from matter',³⁴ not even in the theatre, considered historically, as the anthropocentric medium par excellence.³⁵

Beckett's Theatre Garden

In keeping with Beckett's famously subtractive and minimalist mode of theatre, the theatre garden is an idiom that can do without drama, without conflict, without narrative; it is a space in which nothing – or almost nothing – happens, a location where, as in *Waiting for Godot*, the only thing that grows is a solitary leaf on a naked tree and where 'everything oozes'.³⁶ Time slows down in Beckett's theatre garden, and entropy, the gradual dissipation of energy, is perceived through the construction of an event in which all we can do, as spectators, is to follow 'something taking its course'.³⁷ In this perpetual elapsing that never comes to an end, we experience what Stephen Connor has termed 'slow going', a painful temporality that leaves us exiled, undone, at the mercy of time itself. ³⁸In *Endgame*, Hamm reminds us that theatre, in so far as it is a temporal art, is where 'we breathe, we change. We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom, our ideals!'.³⁹ In the theatre garden, the abstract quality of Clov's

³³ For a related critique of the essentialism inherent to Marx's garden metaphor, see Stephen Bottoms, 'The Garden in the Machine: Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, and the American Absurd' in *Rethinking The Theatre of the Absurd*, ed. by Lavery and Finburgh, pp. 77-104.

³⁴ Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. by Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 194.

³⁵ It is interesting to note the direct influence of Beckett's work in Smithson's geological vision of the world, his vital materialism. *Ibid*, p. 37, 231, 327.

³⁶ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 56.

³⁷ Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 98.

³⁸ Steven Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 115-29.

³⁹ Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 97.

impossible heap is now figured as a heap of decomposing stuff, materiality that, as a result of the passage of time, has lost its shape, its form, but which, for all that, still offers the hope that a new life might begin. This is a life in which, as Joe Kelleher argues in an essay on *Happy Days*, it is enough, simply, to be there, to affirm one's presence on the earth without looking for any transcendent meaning.⁴⁰

This ontology of stubborn naivety, this affirmation of material existence, is certainly how performance theorists Bonnie Marranca and Allen S. Weiss think about gardens. In her neglected text 'Garden/Theater', published originally as the preface to *American Gardening Writing* (1988), Marranca argues that of all the arts, theatre is the one that comes closest to gardening in the respect to which it leaves her 'feeling at home in the ephemerality of time'.⁴¹ Marranca continues:

Really it is not so difficult to move from a theater to a garden. Each creates a world in space that celebrates pure presence, and the fabulous confusion of nature and artifice, which is to say, reality and illusion. At least one half of gardening is dreaming yourself into a new setting.⁴²

If we interpret 'pure presence' materially rather than metaphysically, then Marranca's analogy is more than an abstract metaphor. For what it does is to establish a sensual analogy between theatre and gardening that revolves around how both activities structure temporality. In each instance, human operators – the playwright, the gardener – structure time and space in such a way that the

⁴⁰ Joe Kelleher, 'Recycling Beckett', in *Rethinking The Theatre of Absurd*, ed. by Lavery and Finburgh, pp. 127-46 (p.143).

⁴¹ Bonnie Marranca, 'Garden/Theater' in *Ecologies of Theatre* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1996), pp. 181-84 (p. 182).

⁴² *Ibid*, pp. 182-3.

whole focus is on cultivating an awareness of transience, in celebrating the earth as it is.

Weiss proposes a similar argument in the ten points that make up his 2013 'Manifesto for a Future of Landscape'. According to Weiss, in Point Seven of that text, 'The garden is a hyperbolically ephemeral structure. Anachronism is of the essence, since a garden is all that it was and all that it shall become'.⁴³ Likewise in Point Nine – and in language that draws attention, quite beautifully, to the intimate relationship existing between theatre and gardens - Weiss suggests that, 'the garden is a memory theatre, which must bear vestiges of its sedimented history, including traces of the catastrophes that it has suffered'.⁴⁴ For Weiss, gardens, like theatres, are instances of what Steven Connor, after Jean-Luc Nancy, might call 'radical finitude', places which have neither meaning nor *telos*, but which simply come into being and disappear again.⁴⁵ While there is a certain melancholy here, there is also a joy, a pleasure, a way of recognising the inhuman world - the *oikos* - that we can never know or control. In the garden, as in the theatre, we cultivate strangeness and celebrate Lyotard's 'troublesome guest' who not only imposes 'distress' or 'suffering',⁴⁶ but is 'the *Fremde* [stranger] at the source of every invention, creation, and writing'.⁴⁷

That Beckett, too, was aware of art's capacity to cultivate a space for the inhuman, for disclosing that internal margin that divides us from ourselves, is evident in two letters he sent to Tom MacGreevy in 1934 and 1937, discussing

⁴³ Allen S. Weiss, *Zen Landscapes: Perspectives on Japanese Gardens and Ceramics* (London: Reaktion, 2013), p. 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8

⁴⁵ Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*, pp. 199-202.

⁴⁶ Lyotard, 'Oikos', p. 106.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

the affect produced by the paintings – the landscapes – of first Paul Cézanne and second Jack Yeats:

How far Cézanne had moved from the snapshot pueriles of Manet and Cie when he could understand the dynamic intrusion to be himself and so landscape to be something by definition unapproachably alien, an unintelligible arrangement of atoms, not so much as ruffled by the Reliability Joneses.⁴⁸

What I feel he [Yeats] gets so well, dispassionately, not tragically like Watteau, is the heterogeneity of nature and the human denizens, the unalterable alienness of the 2 phenomena, the 2 solitudes, or the solitude and loneliness, the loneliness in solitude, the impassable immensity between the solitude that cannot quicken to loneliness and the loneliness that cannot lapse into solitude.⁴⁹

For Beckett, the experience of landscape that Cézanne and Yeats provide is not an experience of identification or reconciliation with ‘nature’, and neither is it an attempt to ‘improve it’ by reducing it to human scale, as Capability Brown, the eighteenth century English landscape gardener, sought to do. (In Beckett’s letter, the reference to the ‘Reliability Jones’ is, of course, a sarcastic pun on Capability Brown.) On the contrary, we gain, for Beckett, a more accurate, non-sentimental experience of the land through artworks that are deliberately stylized and formally experimental. This is because, Beckett implies, such work recalibrates our vision, and allows us to catch a glimpse into what the Canadian poet Lisa Robertson refers to as ‘inexplicable opacity’.⁵⁰ If we can claim, as Lois Oppenheim does, that Beckett’s theatre aesthetic is informed as much by fine art practice as by writing, then to be in Beckett’s theatre garden, is not to inhabit some illusory, mimetic garden, but to be made aware of the unapproachably

⁴⁸ Beckett in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 197.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 267.

⁵⁰ Lisa Robertson, *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, the Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities and Related Aporias* (Ontario: BookThug, 2012), p. 53.

alien quality of existence itself, to be left non-reconciled.⁵¹ Importantly, though, and in reference to my earlier point about medium specificity, Beckett discloses the alien presence of the inhuman in his theatre garden by producing a rhythm, creating a tempo, that slows perception down to the point where things and experiences that ordinarily go unnoticed are allowed to impress themselves upon us. In the process, we are weathered in the same way as the three anonymous characters that are trapped in the urns in *Play* (1963). We, too, have been enfolded in the temporal fabric of the work, attuned to a time of 'disappointment' that is always too slow or too late for consciousness.

The Time of the Spectator

In his article 'Godotology: There's Lots of Time in Godot', Richard Schechner shows how Beckett establishes two rhythms, 'one of the play and one of the stage'.⁵² Whereas the rhythm of the play concerns the relationship between playwright, directors and actors, the rhythm of the stage is the metatheatrical rhythm that includes the audience in its duration. Schechner's point about audience inclusion is underlined by both Jonathan Kalb and Steven Connor. For Kalb, Beckett's aim – and this is an avant-garde aim – is to make the spectator aware of 'immediacy', the sense in which the time of the performance is the performance of now, something that goes beyond mere representation.⁵³ According to Connor, the goal is similar but different. By including us in the performance, Beckett does not so much make us present as absent, revealing our

⁵¹ Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2000).

⁵² Richard, Schechner 'Godotology: There's Lots of Time in Beckett', *Modern Drama*, 9:3 (1966), 268-76 (p. 269).

⁵³ Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991), p. 159.

own inability to be on time, to coincide with the performance. In his reading of *That Time* (1976), Connor concentrates on the final words of the play 'no time gone in no time', and argues that the audience, too, has participated in a 'stretch of "no-time", that is, the "non-time" of the dramatic representation, in which there is no real before or after, or even present tense, but only the representations of them'.⁵⁴ However, Connor is careful to caution that this 'non-time' is not a time of entertainment or illusion that will end once the performance has terminated. Rather for Connor, 'we may also feel for a moment the anxiety that this theatrical "no-time" is more like our own lived time...than we care to, or can afford to, believe'.⁵⁵

But how is this 'anxious no-time' constructed in Beckett's theatre garden? In what ways can it be seen as ecological? And how to write it? Since so much has already been written about *Godot* and *Endgame*, I intend to answer these questions by concentrating on *Footfalls*, one of Beckett's short, later pieces, which, on the surface at least, would appear to have little to do either with ecology or gardens. However, as I disclose below, this reluctance to represent is precisely what ties *Footfalls* so forcibly to the world, the very thing that provides actual experience of what it means to live in time. One final point or disclaimer: there is nothing special in choosing *Footfalls* to demonstrate my argument – most of Beckett's *dramaticules* would have served my purpose equally well.

Written in 1975, *Footfalls*, like all of Beckett's *dramaticules*, defies meaning and resists hermeneutic parsing. The audience is presented with a

⁵⁴ Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 159.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

strikingly sparse stage image – a middle-aged women, with ‘dishevelled grey hair’,⁵⁶ dressed in a tattered lace gown paces up and down on an illuminated strip in a darkened space, listening to the low, slow voice of her Mother (V) that has been pre-recorded and broadcast over a speaker system.⁵⁷ Throughout the performance one is never quite sure why May (M) is there, and the question, ultimately, is never resolved. There is neither back-story nor *dénouement*. Indeed, as the play unfolds, according to its own glacial pace and staccato rhythm, our confusion only increases, as we can no longer ascertain, with any certainty, the nature of the relationship between the two women, voice and body, Mother and daughter. In the opening section of the performance, for instance, and despite the strangeness of the situation, a reflective or figurative logic just about holds. For here it is possible to understand the voice as a kind of auditory hallucination, a dialogue in the head, a phantasmatic Mother dreamt up by May as a kind of succour, a ghostly companion to aid her in her endless pacing, her insomniac inability to remain still.

V: Will you never have done? [*Pause.*] Will you never have done...revolving it all?

M. [*Halting.*] It?

V: It all [*Pause.*]. In your poor mind. [*Pause.*]. It all [*Pause.*]. It all.⁵⁸

Our attempts to make sense of the initial situation that we are presented with in *Footfalls* are thrown into doubt, however, in the second section of the piece, when dialogue ends and monologue takes over. While May continues, albeit at a reduced rhythm, to pace her small corridor of light, the acousmatic

⁵⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Footfalls*, p. 399.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 400.

voice of the Mother attains a kind of autonomy, and provides some oblique information - but it is hardly much - into May's condition:

V: See how still she stands, how stark, with her face to the wall. [Pause.] How outwardly unmoved. [Pause.] She has not been out since girlhood. [Pause.] Not since girlhood. [Pause.] Where is she, it may be asked. [Pause.] Why in the old home, the same where she – [Pause.] Where it began. [Pause.] It all began. [Pause.] ...When other girls of her age were out at...lacrosse, she was already here. [Pause]. At this....⁵⁹

The shift from dialogue to monologue explodes dramatic conventions. It is impossible, now, to grasp, fully, the situation we are confronted with. For if the opening section still corresponded to a kind of reality, albeit an hallucinatory one, the voice's investment in narrative, along with her direct address to the audience, forecloses such a conventional, if understandable reading of events in the play. Henceforth, there is nothing representational about the voice, and it cannot be accorded a place within a standard dramatic paradigm. Rather the voice is free-floating, something that we have to accept for what it is, as opposed to what it might mean. In *Footfalls*, the causal logic of both Aristotelian and Brechtian dramaturgy is undone. In its place, Beckett, close to both Symbolism and Surrealism, asks us to accept a different stage, a theatre that has given up on reflecting a world that we supposedly know, and where people and objects retreat and retain their mystery.

The mysteriousness of *Footfalls* is compounded in the final movement of the piece, when the recorded voice of the Mother disappears and the embodied voice of May takes over for what she calls the 'sequel':

M:...Sequel. A little later when she was quite forgotten, she began to – [Pause.] A little later, when as though she had never been, it never been,

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 401.

she began to walk. [Pause.] At nightfall. [Pause.] Slip out at nightfall and into the little church by the north door....⁶⁰

As in *Rockaby* (1981), *Not I* and *That Time*, May's use of the third person pronoun deliberately blurs the space between subject and object, agent and recipient. We no longer know if May is referring to herself, her Mother, or to some other. Everything is as indeterminate and hazy as the 'semblance' that May purports to see in the churchyard at moonlight. Then, in a speech that both repeats and varies the structure of the Mother's monologue, May, as if from nowhere, and appearing, bizarrely, to assume some prior knowledge on the spectator's part, introduces a new fiction, narrates a different story:

M: Old Mrs Winter, whom the reader will remember, old Mrs Winter, one late autumn Sunday evening, on sitting down to super with her daughter after worship, after a few half-hearted mouthfuls laid down her knife and fork, and bowed her head. What is it, Mother, said the daughter, a most strange girl, though scarcely a girl any more....⁶¹

Typically, the strange incident recounted by May is elliptical and unfinished. At its core, there is an absence, a gap, something that refuses to appear:

M: Amy, did you observe anything strange at Evensong? Amy: no Mother, I did not. Mrs W: Perhaps it just my fancy. Amy: Just what exactly, Mother, did you perhaps fancy it was? [Pause.] Just what exactly, Mother, did you perhaps fancy it was? [Pause]...Mrs W: You yourself observed nothing...strange? Amy: No, Mother, I myself did not, to put it mildly...For I observed nothing of any kind, strange or otherwise. I saw nothing, heard nothing, of any kind, I was not there. Mrs W: Not there? Amy: Not there. Mrs W: But I heard you respond. [Pause.] I heard you say Amen....⁶²

The story of Mrs Winters and her daughter, Amy (an anagram of May), has a performative function. It adds an additional layer of opacity to the play we are watching. Not only because the story's strangeness reflects the strangeness of the situation of *Footfalls* itself, but because it complicates further the

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 403.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 403.

relationship between May and her Mother. The very last lines of May's narrative, for example, are the same as those uttered by the Mother at the very start of the play:

M: Amy. [*Pause. No louder.*] Amy. [*Pause.*] Yes, Mother. [*Pause.*] Will you never have done? [*Pause.*] Will you never have done...revolving it all? [*Pause.*] It? [*Pause.*] It all. [*Pause.*] In your poor mind. [*Pause.*] It all. [*Pause.*] It all.⁶³

The narratological shifts, refrains and allusions in the play prevent us from assigning meaning. There is simply no point in trying to work out who May and the Mother are and/or what the status of their relationship is, be that phantasmatic or fictional. Rather Beckett has done his utmost to present us with a situation that we must, if we want to respond to the performance, accept at face value. In *Footfalls*, what is important is not the narrative or story, but the rhythmic construction of the piece, the way in which it works as a totality, impressing itself upon us, entangling us in strangeness, in 'it all'.⁶⁴

Things, of course, are even more complex when one moves from the play text to the performance text. In the physical unfolding of the piece, the mystery of the narrative is only one aspect of the work, something that rumbles away in background, existing at the very edges of consciousness. To watch *Footfalls*, as opposed to reading it, is to be caught in an immediate mood of melancholy, to be enveloped in the ambience of the piece, affected by the shuffling sounds of May's footsteps, the brilliance of the lights, the darkness of the shadows, the grain of the voice, and the tangled tatters of the dress, its fragility. Meaning here is not communicated by words, but by the radiance of things, or perhaps more

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

accurately by Beckett's ability to produce what we might call, after David Williams, a 'rhythmed assemblage', that is, a non-linear form of dramaturgy that includes the audience in its movement, as it makes its contingent and gratuitous passage across time and space.⁶⁵ According to Williams, dramaturgy as 'rhythmed assemblage' is characterised by intensities, atmospheres, and emotions: the aim is to produce significance through a kind of corporeal 'touch', not through deciphering abstract signs.

Beckett's ability to create a performance that simultaneously includes the audience in its pulse and beat, is what makes his late plays properly environmental, that is to say, works in which we inhabit a world as opposed to simply looking at one that we already know. In the world of *Footfalls*, as we might also experience in a garden, actors are no longer human representatives that we identify with or know at the level of empathetic engagement or psychological recognition. Rather, they are things in themselves, objects that retain a sense of discreteness, and that serve no other purpose than their own being there. In that respect, *Footfalls* is not an abstract performance (as one might conventionally find it described), but a decidedly materialist one. Our inability to get behind the surface of the characters, to know and understand them, sensitises us to the play and sheen of surfaces, which, by the very fact of being brought into appearance, overflow their discreteness and start to work upon our senses, affecting us, pulling us into the world of things. In *Footfalls*, as in Beckett's other *dramaticules*, visual perception is no longer something that

⁶⁵ David Williams, 'Geographies of Requiredness: Notes on the Dramaturg in Collaborative Devising', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20.2 (2010), 197-202 (p. 197).

moves out conically from the eye; on the contrary, it is something that moves inwards from the impress of the world, from the ability of matter to move us and so transform our modes of perceiving and thus operating in/on the earth.

Beckett's sculpting of time is crucial to his theatre of affect. Whereas dramatic theatre always seeks to deny its own immersion in time, to transcend the present by investing in narratives that would entertain us and so make us forget our painful grounding in the temporal, Beckett prefers to glue us to the present, allowing us to feel the passage of time itself in our bodies. In *Footfalls*, Beckett achieves this by investing in a logic of deceleration, slowing things down so that what is ordinarily imperceptible – the sound of shuffling feet, the swish of a wrap, the depth of shadows – is brought into consciousness. This slowing down of time does not allow us dominion over the moving surfaces that pass before our eyes by sharpening our attention and honing powers of concentration. On the contrary, deceleration 'speeds things up', attuning us to the different speeds and intensities of the multiple things of the performance. Slowness here disturbs us, prevents us from sitting still. We are enervated and irritated: the performance resists; it produces friction and retains its autonomy. We are unable to dominate it. It escapes our desire to petrify it into meaning, to hold it in our gaze.

In *Footfalls*, the constant pausing of the voice, along with the interrupted pacing of May, gives rise to a syncopated rhythm. The performance draws us in only to thrust us back, to leave us shipwrecked somewhere in the middle of a beat. Like the slowness of the performance, the unevenness of the rhythm prevents you from losing yourself in an object, from becoming one with it. You

connect and disconnect, advance and retreat, find yourself on a constantly shifting margin. In the same way that perception in a garden moves from one object to another without being captured and captivated by any one thing, so Beckett, in his theatre garden, is always concerned to disrupt spectatorial experience, to prevent it from being absorbed completely in the work. The point of this disruption, this *désoeuvrement* of what theatre should supposedly be, is to allow a space for the appearance of what most theatre is unable to bear: the boring, the banal, the thing that refuses to signify – the *oikos*.

The spatial conventions of theatre play an important part in Beckett's desire to produce ecological affect. Unlike durational video works that today are shown everywhere in the white cubes of art galleries, Beckett's garden theatre is located within a black box. You have to go through the performance, to sit with it, to find a way of dealing with its dilation of our habitual temporal frame. That is where – that is how - it works best, as a kind of 'forced entertainment', we might say. In theatre, there is no way you can stop the performance, walk away, talk with someone else, exit the space, if it all becomes too much. This is time as endurance, in the double sense of that word – both time that escapes measurement, as in Henri Bergson's concept of *durée*, but also painful time, time without transcendence, or, what amounts to the same thing, time without the consolation of distraction.⁶⁶ In Beckett's theatre garden, as in *Endgame*, there is, as Hamm says, 'nothing on the horizon', no vista to move towards.⁶⁷ You are always rooted to the spot, to the impossible here and now.

⁶⁶ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (Boston: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 1-22.

⁶⁷ Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 107.

It is no coincidence that the word dominating *Footfalls* is 'it', a pronoun for some unspeakable absence, a signifier of impossibility. The 'it' here is the same 'it' we find in French constructions such as *il y a* (there is), and *il est temps* (it is time). What this 'it' designates in *Footfalls* is the impersonal, ungraspable quality of time itself. The 'it' of the *oikos*, the 'it' that we don't want to admit to or experience, because we can't inhabit or possess it. 'It' is inhuman, impossible, it serves only to point out our difference; our failure to do anything else but 'to revolve', like May, around some empty centre. Nothing to be done in the vicinity of the 'it', this time beyond human time, this time that punctures mastery, this time where we intuit mortality, the necessary disappearance of things.

In this affirmation of transience, this cultivation of time, we find another parallel between Beckett's theatre and the art of gardening. According to Daniel Charles, 'the moss' that covers the rocks in the Zen Garden at Ryoan-Ji, in Kyoto, is the very thing that allows 'the place [to] cultivate and abandon itself to forgetfulness as a vital force, as the very force of time'.⁶⁸ For Charles, moss is an ambivalent and deconstructive signifier, in so far as its 'work consists, in the very same movement, of affirming and annulling'.⁶⁹ In the stony ground of Beckett's theatre garden, the things in *Footfalls* (lights, human bodies, clothes, voices) might be seen as kinds of moss or lichen that insist on their opacity, not simply at the level of signs, but at the level of experience, in their production of a time, an 'it' that simultaneously beckons us in and ejects us in the same moment. In this 'it', we feel discomfited, distracted by our attention, and attentive through

⁶⁸ Daniel Charles in Weiss, *Zen Landscapes*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

distraction. We are impoverished by 'it', simultaneously affirmed and annulled. In this garden, we feel what we might call 'the weight of the world', a strange sort of gravity that always places a barrier, a shadow, between us and things. Although we do not pace the boards, we, the spectators, ultimately, share May's predicament in *Footfalls*. We too, inhabit the shadowland, sit in the dark and experience the impossibility of escaping the world, of being unable to extricate ourselves from a narrow strip of light.

Ironically, though, it is here, in this inescapability, that the ecological meaning of Beckett's theatre resides. Its ability to remind us of the *oikos*, along with its capacity for instigating a corporeal and affective process, bears witness to everything that human beings, with their metaphysical obsessions with exiting the world, strive to repress and escape. Whereas environmentalist thinkers speak of changing recycling habits, of learning to adapt to a system that might delay the catastrophe, Beckett shows us what might emerge if we accept that the worst has already happened and that there is no solution to the ecological crisis. In this moment of ontological weakness and lameness, this acceptance that everything is already exhausted, a different kind of knowledge emerges. Here the *oikos* is no longer pushed away, forgotten, dispelled; it is admitted, allowed to exist, given a space to appear. Typically, Beckett offers neither explanation nor resolution for the appearance of this marginal other, this troublesome guest, so intimate in/to us that it always escapes our clutches. It is simply there as a 'strange stranger', as something we can't incorporate, a left over, an excessive remainder.⁷⁰ But the fact that the other is not only acknowledged, but affirmed in

⁷⁰ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, pp. 38-50.

Footfalls, is the very thing that allows Beckett's play, I would argue, to hold out a sense of ecological hope. Crucially, though, no scenario is sketched out, no representation of what that hope might look like. On the contrary, the future is placed on hold, freeze-framed, stilled. But it is here in this stilling that the future, to use a French word so dear to Jacques Derrida, is posited as *un avenir*, a future that we won't ever know or be able to control, because like the *oikos* itself, it is always to *a-venir*, to come, a time, then, that eludes consciousness, cognition and capture, a time that is marginal.⁷¹

The theory of ecology that I am proposing in this article is difficult. I understand that it has nothing to say about the decisions that face us now with respect to the ecological crisis we are in, and which might well worsen in the years to come. Nevertheless, the fact remains that if we are to live differently on the earth, then another mode of being, an alternative form of thinking is necessary. This will not be done by fetishising nature or by looking for moments of harmony and balance. On the contrary, it is more important to explore moments of ontological difficulty and conflict that, as I suspect, will be impossible to resolve or transcend. However, it seems crucial that we at least acknowledge this impossibility as a basis for action, as a limit or ballast against the Promethean hubris of ecological problem solving. Indeed, it might even be that the failure of a solution might ameliorate things by giving rise to more humble or 'weaker' ways of being human.⁷² As I have tried to argue in this article,

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 64-65.

⁷² For more on weakness and ecology, see Carl Lavery, 'Introduction: Performance and Ecology – What Can Theatre Do?', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 20: 3 (2016), 229-36.

by creating a theatre garden where we are undone in and by time, deposed and dispossessed on the earth, Beckett's theatre leaves us as helpless and indeterminate 'as a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe' that knows not where its future will be.⁷³ For me, this is what gardening with Beckett does, and is precisely the reason why his theatre exists as an ecological practice, something that allows you to live according to a different rhythm, in which humans and non-humans are caught in the vast and paradoxical endlessness of time's eternal transience.

In addition to changing our conceptions about where the ecological charge of Beckett's theatre resides, I hope that the garden analogy I have advanced in this article will have wider implications for the discipline of Theatre Studies in general. To suggest that theatre be approached as a garden challenges the engrained anthropocentrism of the medium itself, the sense in which theatre has always been regarded as the privileged domain of the human, the place in which audiences and performers come together to reflect on pressing social and political issues. Thinking of theatre as a garden rather than a house, however, discloses what most forms of theatre practice and criticism have tended to repress, if not actively foreclose: namely, that the human actor on stage is always already a part of 'nature'. If we accept an expanded view of ecology in which 'nature' and culture form part of a shared world, then there is no need to abandon the artifice of the auditorium or black box for a site-based or immersive aesthetic that would supposedly get us closer to the environment by situating itself within nature, as some of our most innovative ecocritics in Theatre Studies

⁷³ Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 110.

would have us do.⁷⁴ Much better and more progressive, I think, to reconsider the black box as a type of garden, a site where everything and everyone is already 'nature', albeit with different capacities and possibilities. In the theatre garden to look is to be touched, to be affected corporeality by the materiality of the performance itself

To think of theatre as a garden advances, in and by itself, an alternative view of the human subject, one that is line in with Beckett's and Lyotard's conviction that the human is constituted by the inhuman, haunted by the animal in the very heart of its so-called exceptional identity. In the theatre garden, the human is no longer portrayed as an exception to the world, a hero who can use rationality, will and language to transcend time and space. Rather, the actors and spectators who together make up the performance event are shown to be material organisms, whose modes of perception and ways of thinking are bound up with the physical processes of a planet that they cannot escape or master. In my attempts to imagine Beckett's theatre as a garden, I have attempted to argue for a way of doing ecology that, to borrow from Gilles Deleuze's writings on cinema, might allow us 'to discover and restore belief in the world, before or beyond words'.⁷⁵ Importantly, though, the theatre garden makes this affirmation of the world not through the movement of images on a screen, as Deleuze

⁷⁴ See Baz Kershaw, *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2007), pp. 314-18; and Stephen Bottoms' research project 'Reflecting on Environmental Change Through Site-Based Performance' (2010-3), <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH/H03921X/1> (accessed 18 April 2017). At its most basic, the argument here is that black box theatre separates us from the environment by producing subjects who merely look at nature as a spectacle, and so have no corporeal or material relationship with it.

⁷⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 172.

proposes, but through the shared co-presence of bodies living and dying together in an actual space-time enclosure, in the unfolding of something irreversible and inhuman – the cultivation of the *oikos*.

Abstract

This article seeks to offer a new way of engaging with the ecological potential of Beckett's theatre by approaching it, metaphorically, as a *theatre garden*. In doing so, it brings together, for the first time, two disparate trends in Beckett's scholarship – the ecocritical and haptic – and argues for an ecology grounded in affect and temporality. While many of Beckett's works are mentioned in the article, special attention is given to the short play *Footfalls*, which is presented as a work where the *oikos* or what Jean-François Lyotard terms 'the troublesome guest' is allowed a space to emerge. As well as arguing for an alternative form of ecology, the decision to read Beckett's theatre through the figure or trope of the garden is motivated by an attempt to question the so-called anthropocentric basis of the theatre medium in general and, more specifically, to find a mode of writing able to capture and express the 'ecological affect' of Beckett's plays in performance.