Samuel Beckett and World Literature

University of Kent, 4-5 May 2016

Keynote Speakers

Professor Stanley E. Gontarski
Professor Fábio de Souza Andrade

Guest Artist

Ashish Avikunthak

Sponsors

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Organisers

Selvin Yaltir, Rosanne Araújo, Titu Chakraborty
Conference Report

The ‘Samuel Beckett and World Literature’ international conference began with the idea of rethinking Samuel Beckett’s works in light of recent developments in world literature. The word ‘and’ in the title was thus central to its conceptualisation: the conference not only hoped to explore Beckett’s place in literature, theatre studies, performance and film around the world, but its intention was also to address some of the ongoing debates for and against the discipline of world literature from a literary, socio-political and cultural perspective.

The conference hosted speakers and participants from sixteen different countries: Ireland and mainland Europe to countries such as Brazil, China, India and the United States. The panellists consisted of independent scholars, students, lecturers, theatre directors, and experimental film artists. This wide gathering demonstrated the international dissemination of Beckett’s works, and Waiting for Godot in particular. The papers and discussions, moreover, brought to attention the various ways in which his writings have been translated, adapted, often appropriated and re-created in new contexts and in different cultures, frequently building a tension with Beckett’s directorial precisions ever since the first performance of Godot in Paris.

The SBWL conference began on 4 May with Professor Shane Weller’s introduction to the concept of world literature. Starting with Goethe’s famous comment to Eckermann about the emergence of Weltliteratur, the introductory lecture highlighted the re-configurations of the concept over the last century, up to the ongoing debates between Damrosch and Apter in the twenty-first century. This initiated a platform to explore Beckett’s place in world literature: not just as a Nobel Laureate or modernist commodity of European and North American syllabuses, but as a writer who gains (or fails to gain) from translation and circulation within the space and republic of world literature, and the familiar yet foreign nature of whose works resonate (or fail to resonate) across cultures.
Professor Stanley E. Gontarski was next to present the first keynote lecture on ‘The Remains of the Modern: Samuel Beckett’s Elsewhere’. The paper fleshed out the important shift in Beckett’s career, moving away from Joycean ‘omniscience and omnipotence’ and into the Beckettian ‘elsewhere’, which he explained as a paradoxical state of ‘in-betweenness’: at the same time here and there, rooted and rootless, nowhere and everywhere, and so on. This displacement in Beckett’s works proved central throughout the rest of the conference and discussions that ensued. The panel on ‘Beckett, (In)Corporeality’ on Day 2, for instance, elaborated the antithetical nature of Beckett’s corpus: while Dorottya Jászay investigated the Beckettian body in performance and Eleanor Green studied the failures in bodily functions in Beckett’s prose, Dr. Arthur Broomfield, in contrast, discussed pure language and the Beckettian vision as ‘freed of all trappings of the corporeal’.

The keynote lecture by Professor Fábio de Souza Andrade, also on Day 2, established the longevity of Beckett’s impact on contemporary Brazilian experimental theatre and film, through video clips and discussions on adaptations and cinematic recreations of Beckett’s works. The lecture was directly relevant to the central themes that the conference was aiming to thrash out, and it led to an enthusiastic Q&A session and also reflected the approach of several other papers.

During the first panel on Day 1, entitled ‘Transnational Beckett’, Dr. Edward Bizub discussed the intertextual religious allusions in Beckett’s *Murphy* and other writings in comparison with works such as *The Heart of Darkness* and *A Passage to India*, drawing from postcolonial theory; Dr. Douglas Atkinson next discussed the impact of Beckett and modernism on Japan’s Kojin Karatani; and James Baxter examined Beckett’s works in light of American postmodernism.

As part of the panel on ‘Transcultural Technology’, Julie Bénard considered Beckett’s theatre as a ‘hypermedium’ and examined Atam Egoyan’s *Eh Joe* as an intermedial transposition of the television play. Dr. Jean Antoine-Dunne, who was unable to join us from
the University of the West Indies and whose paper was read by Selin Siral, drew a parallel between the Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite’s works and Beckett’s prose and theatre, using Deleuze’s notions of nooshock. Dr. Paul March-Russell explored Beckett’s short prose ‘The Lost Ones’ in light of science fiction and late modernism, and compared the frustrated desires representing the “middle passage” between minority and mass culture with tropes in the works of Brian Aldiss.

In the panel on ‘Beckett’s International Reciprocation’ on Day 2, we moved from Dr. Snežana Kalinić’s paper exploring the postmodernist ‘sequels’ of Godot in Serbian theatre, to a Hindu mythological response in Dr. Priyanka Vaidya’s analysis of karma yoga, and ended with Robert Murtagh’s investigation into Hispanic simpatía that rejected Beckett’s works due to the lack of cultural resonance. In the parallel session on ‘Beckett and the Cosmopolitan Avant-Garde’, Dr Bartosz Lutostański discussed Beckett’s influence on experimental post-war Polish cinema; Juan Luis Toribio Vazquez spoke of Beckett’s Godot in light of its circularity in light of its relation to the concept of World Literature; and Matthieu Protin re-examined the initial reception of Godot in Paris through Beckett’s 'Irishness'.

In addition to the transnational approach to Beckett’s works, the conference held a special roundtable panel on ‘Renegotiating Beckett’s Ireland’, where Moonyoung Hong, Bernadette Fox, Holly Anna Furey, Eimhin Walker, Kurt McGee and Chris J. Wrycraft from Trinity College, Dublin, explored Beckett’s link to Ireland during his lifetime and his more recent rebirth in Dublin. The first four papers were centred around the recent Irish Pan Pan Theatre production of Beckett’s radio play All That Fall; the penultimate paper explored Beckett’s commodification as a national Irish treasure; and the last looked at the writer’s persistent traces of Irish humour and the common element of self-referentiality found in his Irish predecessors and contemporaries. The panel led to a thought-provoking discussion regarding Beckett’s ambiguous ties with his native country.
The last panel of Day 1 was entitled: ‘Beckett, Translation, and World Literature’. This began with Dr. Patricia Novillo Corvalán’s paper that addressed key issues in world literature through Beckett’s translations of Mexican poetry published in the anthology commissioned by UNESCO, with Octavio Paz as the editor. Next, Dr. Llewellyn Brown reconsidered the very important topic of Beckett as a self-translator working in French and English, using extracts from *Textes pour rien* and *Texts for Nothing* to demonstrate the ‘postmodern rejection of an “original” text’. Wei Zheyu and Mary O’Byrne followed this strand of thought in delivering their joint paper and performance entitled: ‘100% Guaranteed Beckett: Hat It Been Bilingual’. The two posited through their practice-based research that much of Beckett’s works — Lucky’s speech in *Godot*, for example, in English and when translated into Chinese — resisted any single exegetical paradigm or hegemonic voice, and particularly the totalising effect of ‘global culture’.

At the end of Day 1, we returned to the question of Beckett and world literature, with the screening of Ashish Avikunthak’s feature film *Kalkimanthankatha* (2015) at the Gulbenkian Cinema. In his film, the Indian cinematographer, who is amongst the pioneers of the ‘cinema of prayoga’, translated and relocated the dialogue in *Godot* at the Maha Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, a religious festival that takes place every twelve years, with two Bengali travellers waiting for the manifestation of Kalki. Vladimir and Estragon are here re-conceptualised in a north-Indian religio-ritualistic setting, buzzing with the unseen voices of millions of homeless sanyasins or traveling pilgrims in the background. The Q&A session with the artist at the end established that more than an adaptation, the film is a new artistic creation of a pseudo couple discussing everything from *sunyata* and *avatars*, to femininity and Mao Tse-tung’s ‘Little Red Book’, while the ritualistic movements the characters performed captured the highly localised yogic practices (reminiscent of ‘do the tree’ in Beckett). The narrative and disjointed filmic structure, moreover, consisted of a pattern of repetition and circularity containing paratactic
conversations, echoing Beckett’s play, which indicated an intermedial transmission of the Beckettian form from theatre into experimental cinema.

The closing panel on ‘Beckett and the Global Socio-Political Field’ began with Eva Kuras’ examination of Godot’s topography and its liminal sense of time and place. The paper related the simultaneously abstract yet local aspect of Godot with its translatability across sociopolitical divides. The following paper by Richard Pettifer and Andrew Fuhrmann considered Beckett’s legacy from an Orwellian point of view with the suggestion that Beckett’s art of failure passively resisted being pigeonholed into any political system, including the global anti-capitalist cause. In the concluding paper, Dr. Mischa Twitchin shared his own artistic adaptation in film of Beckett’s ‘Catastrophe’ to express the need to dissociate Beckett from preconceived notions enforced by dictatorial societies. The three papers raised several very central questions with regards to Beckett studies today, some of which were brought up during the Q&A that ensued.

The success of this closing panel and the conference as a whole lay in the way that they problematised any simplistic understanding of world literature – from whatever cultural and multidisciplinary perspective – with Beckett at the centre. The panelists, keynote speakers, artists (including actors), directors and cinematographers all addressed some of the key ongoing debates in the field of world literature and Samuel Beckett, while also raising the stakes for future modes of enquiry.

Note of Thanks
Apart from the immense support and contribution we received from the Centre for Modern European Literature, we are also very grateful to the Faculty of Humanities for the Research Fund, the Vice Chancellor’s Discretionary Fund, and the Departments of Comparative Literature, Modern Languages, Religious Studies, the School of English at the University of Kent, and the UFRN in Brazil, without whose valuable contributions we would not have been
able to host this event. We are also very grateful for all the help, advice, and support we received along the way from Professor Shane Weller, the keynote speakers and special guest, Kelly Leonard from Kent Hospitality, Rebecca Brown and Liz Moran from the Gulbenkian, Melanie Dilly, Jo Spoon, Angelos Evangelou, and Juan Luis from the Department of Comparative Literature, Jacqui Martlew, Selin Siral, the finance team at SECL, and all the conference delegates.

Other Details

Below is the link to the official conference website. It contains the call for papers, and all the information on keynote speakers, organisers, sponsors, and other details:

https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/beckettworldlit/

Link to the final conference programme, with all the paper abstracts and short bios linked to the paper titles: https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/beckettworldlit/category/conference-programme/

Link to download the poster, designed by Selin Siral, and the PDF programme:

https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/beckettworldlit/files/2015/10/SBWL-Final-Programme-.pdf

Selected photographs from the conference are available on GoogleDrive and can be accessed through: https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B_Jpqg9mXmjLeumRIUjiB6SG9WY2s

Feedback from Participants

‘The conference developed a theme that is very important in relation to Beckett’s work, and which was explored from a multiplicity of points of view. The contributions were extremely enriching. Personally, I also appreciated the inclusion of participants from France: it is an oft-neglected dimension of Beckett studies, but which is important for the diversification of
critical approaches. The atmosphere was very warm and convivial, not least owing to the meticulous work of preparation, and the very attentive presence and involvement of the organisers.’ - **Llewellyn Brown, Lycée international de Saint-Germain-en-Laye.**

‘The conference was very diverse and exciting, really honouring the idea of world literature.’ - **Professor Fábio de Souza Andrade, University of São Paulo, Brazil.**

‘Although I was only able to attend part of the conference, what struck me was a) the diversity of the papers, applying a range of methods to most aspects of Beckett’s oeuvre, and b) the warmth and camaraderie of the event. Both are testimony to the hard work put in by the organisers to ensure that this was a well-coordinated and well-received occasion.’ - **Dr. Paul March-Russell, University of Kent.**