VERSIONS OF EMBODIMENT/VISIONS OF THE BODY
IN BECKETT’S "...BUT THE CLOUDS..."1

Anna McMullan

Versions of embodiment

If today, there can be such an intense fascination with the fate of the body, might this not be because the body no longer exists? For we live under the dark sign of Foucault’s prophecy that the bourgeois body is a descent into the empty site of a dissociated ego, a “volume in disintegration”, traced by language, lacerated by ideology, and invaded by the relational circuitry of the field of postmodern power (Kroker, 20).

The body’s role as resource for and object of value and power elicits contrary responses of attributing and denying authority to the body as an alternative source of knowledge as distinguished from knowledge formally recognised as such by culture (Cooey, 42).

As the twentieth century draws to a close, apocalyptic discourses on the body are proliferating. For some, the body is a site of catastrophe in an age obsessed with bodily health/infection, and in which corporeality has become subsumed in technologized virtual reality. For others, the body is a locus of possibility, offering alternative sites of authority and knowledge from which a critique of the “field of postmodern power” can be mounted. These debates have provided critical vocabularies for exploring the preoccupation with the body and issues of embodiment with which so much of Beckett’s early and late work wrestles. A considerable amount of recent Beckett criticism has drawn attention to this field of enquiry,2 and Steven Connor affirms its contemporary urgency, perhaps particularly because Beckett’s work seems to present contradictory attitudes towards the body as both limiting corporeality and as site and source of subjectivity:

Philosophically, Beckett’s work belongs to and continues to compel the thought of our time in its repeated and insistent discovery of the impossibility of disembodied thought. Beckett’s writing attempts all the time to separate itself from the carnal, from experience, from history, from theatricality. But there is a Joycean jubilation in the very recalcitrance of the body in Beckett’s work, and a conjunctive insistence on the impossibility of thinking except through the body, and under the historical conditions of embodiedness. Beckett’s work is thus powerfully premonitory of many of those new forms of philosophy, from feminism to radical ecology, that are reinterpreting the Cartesian heritage of modernity, by refusing the refusal of the body which has been necessary

353
to secure the separative authority of consciousness, reason and the subject” (Connor 1992, 101).

In this paper, I would like to explore the paradoxical relation to embodiment in Beckett’s drama, with particular reference to “...but the clouds...”.

Beckett’s early fictional work, as several critics have commented, tends to stress a Cartesian alienation of consciousness from the physical body. The narrator in Murphy describes “the feeling, growing stronger as Murphy grew older, that his mind was a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own, self-sufficient and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body” (Beckett 1973, 64). A strong sense of the body’s palpable, indeed decaying corporeality is present in the plays up until “Play”. Vladimir’s ailing prostate, Estragon’s ailing and smelly feet, Lucky’s suppurating neck are part of an array of malfunctioning bodies, suffering from impaired hearing, vision or mobility, drawing attention to the body as a decaying organism.

In the theatre, the body tends to be read as a sign of identity and subjectivity. However, particularly in the earlier work, Beckett materialises the body to such an extent that a certain distance is set up between the sign and its referent — character, identity or subjectivity. This is confirmed by the character’s comments on their experience of corporeality, as in Winnie’s exclamation: “What a curse mobility”. The principle of separation of speech and movement in Beckett’s theatre highlights this distance between the non-corporeal voice, not subject to material limits, and the recalcitrant corporeality of the body. In much of the later drama, this divorce is physicalized through the technological and spatial separation of voice and body.

The paradox of Beckett’s portrayal of the body re-emerges here. On the one hand, the body’s materiality distances it from the subjectivity ‘within’; on the other hand, the presentation of the body as expressive form re-distributes subjectivity in a non-psychologized and re-materialized mode over the entire physical scene of the performance. Bodies and their actions or movements are very carefully co-ordinated and indeed choreographed in Beckett’s theatre, as Beckett’s director’s notebooks testify. The sparseness of the stage setting in Waiting for Godot, Beckett’s first performed play, foregrounds the limited visual elements within the stage space: the actor’s bodies, individual items of clothing: hats, boots, trousers; the few stage props visible, the stone, the tree, the carrot. When Beckett came to direct his own plays, he concentrated on this visual and plastic scenic text. In relation to the 1975 Schiller Theater production of Godot, which Beckett directed, Walter Asmus reports that Beckett wanted to “give confusion a shape