



Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings

ISSN: 2506-8709

Journal homepage: <https://clic.research.vub.be/journal>

 Submit your article to JLIC

Bodies in Samuel Beckett's Theatre from the Perspective of Alberto Giacometti's Sculptures

Wenjun Zhu – Université libre de Bruxelles

Issue: 5.1

Published: Spring 2020

To link this article: <https://clic.research.vub.be/volume-5-issue-1-2020>

To cite this article: Zhu, Wenjun. "Bodies in Samuel Beckett's Theatre from the Perspective of Alberto Giacometti's Sculptures." *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2020, pp. e1-31.



BY-NC 4.0 DEED: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license.

Bodies in Samuel Beckett's Theatre

from the Perspective of Alberto Giacometti's Sculptures

Wenjun ZHU

Université libre de Bruxelles

James Knowlson reveals in his biography of Samuel Beckett that the playwright drew visual inspiration from Caspar David Friedrich's painting 'Two Men Contemplating the Moon' [Zwei Männer in Betrachtung des Mondes] to envision the tableau of *Waiting for Godot* (*Damned to Fame* 53-54). The correspondence between the play's scene setting and the composition of the painting is an example of intermediality, i.e. "a crossing of borders between media" (Rajewsky 46) and "a bridge between medial differences that is founded on medial similarities" (Elleström 12). Irina Rajewsky defines three fundamental subcategories of intermediality: medial transposition (such as film adaptations and novelizations), media combination (the so-called multimedia or mixed media), and intermedial references, in which "the given media-product thematizes, evokes, or imitates elements or structures of another" (53). As an example of the third subcategory, *Waiting for Godot* refers to 'Two Men Contemplating the Moon' because Beckett's image of two tramps standing still by a tree under pale moonlight evokes Friedrich's oil painting.

To gain insights into Beckett's theatrical productions, this article elaborates on the concept of intermedial references. According to Rajewsky, this concept describes how "the media product uses its own media-specific means, either to refer to a specific, individual work produced in another medium", such as Friedrich's painting or another artwork, "or to refer to a specific medial

subsystem [...] or to another medium qua system [...]", such as painting or sculpture in a general sense (52-53). In the case of intermedial references, only the referencing medium – Beckett's theatre, on which my article focuses – is present.

For Beckett, references to visual arts, as in the case of *Waiting for Godot*, are not exceptional. As a playwright and director, Beckett intended to tear apart the 'veil of language'¹ and turned to visual expression. According to S. E. Gontarski, as "a writer with more than a casual interest in the visual arts, Beckett discovered that theatre allowed him to paint (or sculpt)" and "to work directly with form, as a plastic, a visual artist" ("The No Against" xix). The references of Beckett's theatrical writings to paintings, especially those of Caspar David Friedrich, Jack B. Yeats, Bram van Velde, and Avigdor Arikha, have been thoroughly discussed in biographical and academic works, such as James Knowlson and John Haynes's *Images of Beckett* (2003), David Lloyd's *Beckett's Thing: Painting and Theatre* (2016), Lois Oppenheim's *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art* (2000), and Conor Carville's *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts* (2018), to name a few. However, the aesthetic affinities between Beckett's theatre and sculpture remain to be further explored.

According to Knowlson, Beckett's interest in sculpture can be traced back to his 1927 vacation in Florence, where he first saw Michelangelo's *David*. On his journey from Berlin in January and February 1937, Beckett indulged himself with thirteenth- to sixteenth-century German sculpture and extensively commented on this experience in his diaries. In a letter to Thomas MacGreevy on 16 February 1927, Beckett delightedly reported on "Naumburg with marvellous 13th-century sculpture in the Dom" (Beckett qtd. in Fehsenfeld et al. 445). Although his fascination with sculpture is hardly comparable to his lasting enthusiasm for painting, Beckett was

¹ In his letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett wrote that language is increasingly "a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind." (Beckett qtd. in Fehsenfeld et al. 518)

increasingly drawn towards sculpture, and, as this article will argue, this attraction is clearly discernible from the evolution of his stage images and dramaturgical strategies.

The Path from Theatre to Sculpture

If we examine Beckett's theatrical works in chronological order, it is evident that their intermedial references to sculpture increase progressively. To begin with, Beckett's growing interest in sculptural effect can be seen in the modifications made to his early plays. Ruby Cohn observes that in Beckett's theatrical notebook and productions of *Waiting for Godot*, "as opposed to the printed text, each act begins and ends in absolute stillness" (259). Beckett listed sixteen waiting points in his notebook for the production at the Schiller-Theater, Berlin (Knowlson and McMillan 325-27). According to the production notebook for *Endgame* at Riverside Studios, he required Clov to "mov[e] painful [,] as economical as possible. When possible [,] none" (Cohn 193). This focus on stillness shows that Beckett paid particular attention to frozen postures in his revised texts and directorial notes, thus transforming actors' bodies into sculptures.

When writing his later plays, Beckett emphasized sculptural stasis and reduced movements to a minimum. In *Play*, one man and two women are trapped in three urns and are obliged to stay motionless throughout the play. As Gontarski states, from *Play* onwards, Beckett tended to "feature renewed emphasis on the static image, still-point, *tableaux vivants*, or *Wartestelle*, literally waiting points, which bear more resemblance to painting or sculpture than to traditional theatre" ("De-theatricalizing Theatre" xxiii-xxiv). Mark Nixon explains the influence of German ecclesiastical sculpture on the author and claims that "Beckett's later drama undoubtedly owes much to the plastic arts in its stonelike quality" (148). In *Ghost Trio*, for instance, this "stonelike" quality is exemplified by "the pose of the [male] figure, the structural composition of the scene and the use of the colour gray" (Nixon 148). In other late plays, the visual references develop into

explicit verbal allusion. In *Ohio Impromptu*, the two inactive figures are gradually petrified, and Beckett made the Reader repeatedly deliver the line “they sat on as though turned to stone” (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 447) This self-reflexive phrase indicates that Beckett incorporated sculptural elements into theatre.

Intermedial references to sculpture are particularly prominent in *Catastrophe*, whose plot and setting evoke the actions of sculpting and modelling. *Catastrophe* stages the process of a final rehearsal. Four characters interact on a bare stage: the director (D), his female assistant (A), the protagonist (P), and Luke, in charge of the lighting (L). Throughout the play, the assistant manipulates the protagonist’s body and adjusts his costume and position under the director’s impatient and arbitrary instructions. As will be argued in the third section of this article, the play can be considered as an allegory of the relationship between sculptor and sculpture, since the protagonist is being shaped by the director and his assistant like a living statue. As Beckett’s artistic style matured, intermedial references to sculpture are no longer restricted to individual works, but form a vital aspect of his artistic style.

The intermediality between Beckett’s theatre and sculpture has been discussed by a number of scholars. The sculpture-related remarks in Beckett’s German diaries have been studied by Mark Nixon (2011) and by James Knowlson in his “Beckett the Tourist: Bamberg and Würzburg” (2008). In addition, Claire Lozier has explored the affinities between Beckett’s prose and Wolfskehlmeister’s medieval funerary sculptures, concentrating on the difference of posture and the tendency toward secularization. Apart from the research about historical sculptures, the articles in *Samuel Beckett and Contemporary Art* (Reginio et al. 2017) map the connections between Beckett’s works and minimalism as well as conceptual art. In the article “Sculpture, Theater and Art Performance: Notes on the Convergence of the Arts” (1986), Silvio Gaggi, for instance, puts

Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and George Segal's sculpture *Alice Listening to Her Poetry and Music* in dialogue. Lastly, Olga Beloborodova and Pim Verhulst's recent article "Human Machines Petrified: *Play*'s Mineral Mechanics and *Les statue meurent aussi*" (2019) focuses on intersections between *Play* and the art of sculpture and provides a good overview of the state of the art. Most of these studies either assume Beckett's works as a target of influence or a source of inspiration, but their focus tends to be restricted to individual plays. Therefore, this article investigates references to sculpture as a significant feature in Beckett's theatrical oeuvre at large.

Concretely, it examines the resonances between Beckettian stage images and the sculptures of his contemporary Alberto Giacometti and focuses on their similar shaping of bodies. Adopting an intermedial approach, the exploration does not necessarily suggest a direct influence but rather, as Rajewsky underlines, focuses on the "as if" character of intermedial references" as "a specific, illusion-forming quality" (54). As exemplified by the protagonist in *Catastrophe*, the bodies in Beckett's productions are employed in a way that "corresponds to, and resembles, elements, structures and representational practices" of sculpture, thus generating an illusion of sculpture (Rajewsky 57). The "as if" character lies not only in the author's intention, but also in the reception of an audience that perceives these bodies "as if" they resemble Giacometti's statues and vice versa. As a result, Giacometti's filiform sculptures become a static play on a miniature stage, or rather, Beckettian figures are seemingly incarnated in Giacometti's 'Walking Man' ('Homme qui marche'). The correspondence and resemblance, on the one hand, give shape to the sculptural effect produced by Beckett's dramaturgical and directorial strategies. On the other hand, they reveal that Beckett shared similar aesthetic preferences and world views with Giacometti. Of course, as the above-mentioned research indicates, the resonance with Giacometti's artworks only constitutes one facet of the intermedial references to sculpture in Beckett's oeuvre, and the

sculptural qualities of his stage images should not be narrowed down to Giacometti. However, as this article demonstrates, the intermedial comparison between these two artists and oeuvres promises to be particularly productive for determining Beckett's late theatrical style and for describing how the intermedial references to sculpture allowed him to expand the representational mode of the theatre.

In what follows, this article takes the shaping of actors' bodies as a point of departure to study the intermedial references to sculpture in Beckett's plays. The concept of the human body, which is essential to both performance and figurative sculpture, lies at the core of the intermedial comparison between theatre and sculpture. Rajewsky holds that intermedial references expand "representational modes of the medium being referred to" (57). Many dramatists and theatre makers (including Maurice Maeterlinck, Edward Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Jean Genet) have associated theatre with sculpture, where the presence of the body is concerned. By exploring the tension between marble, bronze, or other mineral substances, and flesh, immobility and movement, and death and life, they proposed original styles of theatre and performance. Accordingly, the following sections will discuss intermedial references to sculpture, especially to Giacometti's statues, and attend to how they enrich the theatrical representation of bodies in Beckett's theatre.

The resonance between Beckett's and Giacometti's artworks can be partially explained by their personal interaction and the mutual Parisian historical and cultural context, as described in Christopher Heathcote's "When Beckett Commissioned Giacometti" (2013). Therefore, this article first gives an overview of biographical parallels between the lives of Giacometti and Beckett.

Alberto Giacometti and Samuel Beckett: Biographical Affinities

Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) was a Swiss sculptor and painter who worked mainly in Paris. Between 1930 and 1934, he experimented with Cubism and Surrealism. After he quit the Surrealist movement led by André Breton, he turned from abstraction to figuration and used models to make portraits from living beings. Before WWII, Giacometti created the miniature head sculptures, while the sculptures he produced after the war are characterized by their elongation and slenderization, representing his mature style.

According to Knowlson, the relationship between Giacometti and Beckett began in 1947, when “Beckett started to meet Alberto Giacometti in late bars during their mutually insomniac, early hours” (*Damned to Fame* 371). James Lord’s biography of the sculptor provides different insights into the relationship between the two artists. He claims that the first encounter between Giacometti and Beckett took place at Café de Flore in 1937. Since then, they met from time to time, “usually at night”, and wandered randomly. “It was a very private, almost secretive, and secret friendship” (Lord 190). In September 1951, Beckett wrote in a letter that, when walking around Montparnasse, he had met Giacometti, who had “all stunning perceptions”, and who wanted “to render what he sees [...] when one has the ability to see as he does” (Beckett qtd. in Craig et al., *The Letters*, Vol. 2 294). Here, Beckett clearly admires Giacometti’s outstanding vision. In May 1961, Giacometti designed the tree for the *mise en scène* of *Waiting for Godot* in the Théâtre National de l’Odéon. Beckett commented on Giacometti’s stage design with admiration: “Superb. The one bright spot in this so far dreary exhumation” (Beckett qtd. in Craig et al., *The Letters*, Vol. 3 409).

Apart from this biographical connection, Beckett and Giacometti had to endure similar historical circumstances, namely WWII. Though they made different decisions during the

occupation of France – Beckett actively engaged in the resistance, whereas Giacometti made a five-day exodus from Paris – their wartime experience exerted a profound influence on their artistic creation. Additionally, both men shared a similar cultural context, though they represented the post-war human condition through different media. They frequented the same circle of Parisian intellectuals, meaning that both were closely linked with the Existentialists. The biographical affinities and their similar views of art, life and death provide the ground for my analysis.

Some scholars have already noticed the aesthetic affinities between the works of Beckett and Giacometti. Fred Miller Robinson's article "'An Art of Superior Tramps': Beckett and Giacometti" (1981) uses Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception to interpret Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* and Giacometti's walking figures. Matti Megged's *Dialogue in the Void: Beckett and Giacometti* (1992) associates Giacometti's search for the essential with Beckett's and elucidates their common sense of failure, as well as their compulsion to express. Manfred Milz's *Samuel Beckett und Alberto Giacometti: Das Innere als Oberfläche* (2006) sheds light on two mutual themes of their artworks from 1929 to 1936: "divisiveness" ("Entzweiung") and "process" ("Prozeß"). Timothy Mathews's chapter "Walking with Angels in Giacometti and Beckett" (2014) discusses points of intersection between the two artists, such as untouchable materiality and uncertainty. Mathews mainly uses Beckett's novel *Watt* as a reference point to interpret Giacometti's sculptures. Michael D. Sollars' "Kafkaesque Absurdity in the Aesthetics of Beckett and Giacometti" (2013) applies cognitive poetics to the inter-artistic comparison between Kafka, Giacometti and Beckett. Thierry Dufrêne's *Alberto Giacometti: Les Dimensions de la Réalité* briefly mentions that the spatial isolation of Giacometti's sculptures can be associated with the existential solitude in the works of Sartre, Genet and Beckett (115).

However, the primary sources of these studies are mostly confined to Beckett's fiction and drama, generally ignoring his theatre and performance. Some existing research concerns Giacometti's sculptures of the 1930s, neglecting his post-war statues. In addition, most scholars adopt a different focus and aim to interpret Giacometti's artworks through Beckett's texts. Finally, none of the research focuses on the visual representation of the body. My article addresses this gap in research by adopting an intermedial approach. Focusing on intermedial references, in particular, it presents a detailed iconographic analysis of bodies in Beckett's theatre that emphasizes visual features and stage directions.

The following sections elaborate on distinct aesthetic affinities between Beckettian theatrical bodies and Giacometti's sculpture, that is to say, on specific qualities of bodies in Beckett's theatre that illustrate their intermedial references to Giacometti's post-war statues: de-individualization, physical weakness, the oscillation between life and death, and fragmentation. Taking relevant elements like costume, gesture, and movement into consideration, this article scrutinizes the representation of the body in Beckett's theatre from the perspective of Giacometti's sculptures. My analysis draws mainly on case studies of Beckett's texts and directorial notebooks of *Happy Days* (1961), *Play* (1963), *Not I* (1972), *Footfalls* (1976) and *Catastrophe* (1982), and further explores the complex factors that contribute to the formation of Beckett's artistic style. This study reveals that the references to sculpture broaden the representational mode of Beckett's theatre, as he created innovative forms of de-individualized, emaciated, partly buried and fragmented bodies that resemble Giacometti's sculptures.

1. *De-individualization*

Giacometti's sculptures and Beckett's theatre are characterised by the parallel tendency of eliminating details. Giacometti's figures have vague and expressionless faces and lack distinct

clothes or ornaments. Their surfaces are mostly covered by a homogeneously rough texture. As Giacometti's sculpted heads become increasingly tiny, and the bodies are extremely slenderized, they gradually shed physical details (see figure 1). Beside anatomical detail and complicated positions, Giacometti also abolished individual characteristics by mixing the features of different models. Annette and Diego, in the series 'walking man' and 'standing woman', lose their particular traits. Indifferent, unidentifiable, they are generalized visualizations of human existence.



Fig. 1. Alberto Giacometti, *Quatre femmes sur socle*, 1950, Bronze, Fondation Giacometti, Paris.

A removal of external accessories equally constitutes Beckettian theatrical corporeality. In Beckett's theatre, the stage design, costumes, and props display the "maximum of simplicity and symmetry" (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 138). Beckett wrote in his notebook for the 1976 Royal Court production of *That Time*: "make it smaller, on the principle that less is more" (360). Accordingly, he went through the process of reducing colours, props and movements. In his early

play *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon and Vladimir are still playing with their hats and boots in order to kill time and entertain the audience, whereas in his late works, such as *Play*, *Footfalls*, and *That Time*, unnecessary props are left out and the characters lose their inessential attributes. In *Play*, there are only three urns on the stage, each one holding a head with features indistinguishable to the audience. The three figures maintain the same position throughout the entire performance, without operating any extra props.

Moreover, Beckett's increasing demand for monochrome results in theatrical bodies that resemble Giacometti's statues. This can be seen in the production-generated changes he made when directing his late plays. For instance, when directing *Come and Go* (1966), Beckett modified the costumes for the three women. Instead of the violet, red, and yellow coats in the original text, Beckett muted the coats to three shades of grey, and the broad hats and long coats were stripped of ornament so that the women exuded a "mineral" quality (Cohn 235). When Beckett mounted the 1985 production of *What Where* in Stuttgart, he noted: "Color eliminated." (Beckett qtd. in Gontarski, *Theatrical Notebooks* 431)

Analogous to Giacometti's sculptural technique, Beckett also eliminated individual physical details to achieve a de-individualised corporeality. In his late plays, the characters have neither names nor physical characteristics and are thus assimilated to each other. For example, in the stage directions of *Quad* (1982) and *What Where* (1983), Beckett requires the actors to be "as alike as possible" (*Dramatic Works* 469). The three faces in *Play*, in turn, are severely "lost to age and aspect" (*Dramatic Works* 307) and indistinguishable from one another. Comparing Beckett's theatrical bodies to Giacometti's statues foregrounds how their indistinct appearances eliminate the identities of his characters and distance them from a realistic context. As Alain Badiou writes with regard to Beckett, "it is only by losing and dissipating these peripheral calamities that the

essence of generic humanity may be grasped” (3). In other words, using the principle of de-individualization, Beckett’s and Giacometti’s artworks transform bodies into figures representing human existence.

2. *Physical Weakness*

Another similarity between Giacometti’s statues and Beckett’s figures is their physical emaciation and debility. Giacometti’s post-war sculptures are marked by skeletal thinness. He reduced the volume of his sculptures to such an extent that the sculpted bodies are elongated and slenderized. This distortion situates them between figuration and abstraction, between living flesh and dry corpse, indicating undernourishment or destitution. This aesthetic partially results from Giacometti’s personal experiences during WWII, as he witnessed the devastation of lives during his exodus from Paris. Giacometti’s sculpture ‘Falling Man’ (‘Homme qui chavire’, figure 2), in particular, emphasizes corporeal frailty.



Fig. 2. Alberto Giacometti, *Falling Man*, 1950, Bronze, Musée Granet.

The heavy bulk of the pedestal contrasts with the light and vulnerable body, accentuating the tendency of falling, which is also a recurrent theme in Beckett's works. Displaying an extremely fragile body, this sculpture captures a subtle balance. As Dufrêne indicates, this image probably stems from Giacometti's sense of vertigo and lightness after the car accident that had broken his leg on the Place des Pyramides in 1938 (138). The male figure strives to hold its body upright, but his efforts to resist gravity are in vain. At the same time, and in spite of its overall fragility, the figure's upturned head makes it an embodiment of persistence and perseverance.

Moreover, the pitted surfaces of Giacometti's statues resemble wrinkled skin and suggest aging. Giacometti seldom burnished the surfaces of his sculptures produced after the surrealist period. The surfaces are mostly covered by a granulated texture, sometimes assimilated to their plinths, as if the flesh were decaying and covered by mud, or as if their clothes were ragged and badly worn (figure 3).



Fig. 3. Alberto Giacometti, *Bust of Diego*, 1954, Bronze, Centre Pompidou.

The bodies in Beckett's theatre are similarly endowed with fragility and often suffer from aging, sickness, or invisible violence. As Roger Blin notices, "each of Beckett's characters is afflicted with an illness" (87-88).² In *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo becomes blind, and Lucky becomes dumb; in *Endgame*, Clov cannot sit, while Hamm cannot stand. Winnie being half-buried in *Happy Days* and the three heads being trapped in the urns in *Play* are also allusions to physical disability. *Catastrophe*, in turn, presents the vulnerable body of the protagonist as he is exposed to the violence of the director and his assistant. During the rehearsal, the assistant observes that the protagonist's hands are "crippled" with "fibrous degeneration", that they are "crawl-like" (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 458). This description not only indicates the protagonist's disability and compares the human body to a wretched animal, but also hints at the author's health condition. Knowlson recounts that in 1964, Beckett "became aware of a stiffening in the tendons of his hand that was later diagnosed as Dupuytren's contracture" (*Damned to Fame* 455). This ordeal must have deepened Beckett's understanding of illness and disability. In *Catastrophe*, as the rehearsal proceeds, the assistant notes that the protagonist is "shivering" (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 459), implying that he may suffer from sickness or terror. However, this remark is ignored by the director, and the rehearsal continues. In the end, the character's vitality has been stripped away from his exhausted body. The dreadful image of the dehumanized victim evokes Giacometti's tenuous figures. However, "P raises his head, fixes the audience" in the end (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 461). With his compelling gaze, the protagonist resists the process of manipulation and dehumanization. This gesture of resistance echoes the upturned head of Giacometti's falling man.

Beckett's artistic style is deeply rooted in his early fascination with funerary sculpture. In his German diaries, Beckett praises the medieval sculptor "Wolfskehlmeister" who carved the

² My translation. Original quote: "Chacun des personnages de Beckett est affublé d'une maladie."

statue of Bishop Otto von Wolfskehl in Würzburg as “a Master of the senile and [the] collapsed” (Beckett qtd. in Knowlson, “Beckett the Tourist” 29). Later, he admires the “collapsed and hopelessly humble representation by the master” again (Beckett qtd. in Knowlson, “Beckett the Tourist” 29). In the 1920s, Beckett had been obsessed with decrepit and collapsed figures, and as Knowlson notices, “[t]his perception reached forward also to his later post-war work” (Knowlson, “Beckett the Tourist” 29). Badiou attributes “the destitution of Beckett’s characters” to “an allegory of the infinite miseries of the human condition” (44). Just like with Giacometti, Beckett’s preference for gaunt and distorted bodies marked by despair or anguish, which he crystallized into stage images, may be traced back to the profound effect of his wartime experience. In 1945, Beckett worked in a hospital founded by the Irish Red Cross in the Norman town of St-Lô where, in the aftermath of war, he saw ruins and numerous sick and handicapped bodies of victims. Knowlson holds that many features of Beckett’s plays “arise directly from his experience of radical uncertainty, disorientation, exile, hunger and need” (*Damned to Fame* 351).

With their allusions to aging, costumes and gestures, Beckett’s works often yield effects similar to the coarse appearance of Giacometti’s sculptures. In *Footfalls*, Beckett writes in the stage directions: “MAY, dishevelled grey hair, worn grey wrap hiding feet, trailing” (*Dramatic Works* 399). According to the dialogue, May is in her forties. However, her grey hair shows her premature senility. When directing the play, Beckett allegedly described her costume as “tattered”, “a faint tangle of tatters”, and “the costume of a ghost” (Asmus qtd. in Gontarski, *Theatrical Notebooks* 283). The worn dress and tousled hair embody the passing of time and May’s miserable living conditions (figure 4). Moreover, Beckett is supposed to have told the actress of May: “When you walk, [...] you slump together” (Asmus qtd. in Gontarski, *Theatrical Notebooks* 282-83). While May’s costume and movements convey a fragile corporeality, her pacing up and down,

repetitively and endlessly like a metronome, indicates that her soul, as symbolized by her ragged clothes, has been worn out by meaninglessness.



Fig. 4. Billie Whitelaw as May in the première production of *Footfalls* at Royal Court Theatre, London, in 1976. Photo by John Haynes.

Bearing a close resemblance to the slenderized shape, precarious position, and granulated surface of Giacometti's post-war sculptures, Beckett's theatre visualizes the fragility, aging, and weakness of bodies through the display of tormented bodies and ragged costumes. Echoing both artists' wartime experiences, these bodies symbolize the frailty of human existence. Yet, in spite of their fragility, Beckett's and Giacometti's bodies also firmly establish their presence in the space and thereby gesture at the spirit of human perseverance.

3. *Buried Bodies and the Oscillation Between Life and Death*

Rough surfaces situate Giacometti's sculptures between human and inhuman, organic and mineral. Their texture resembles solidified magma. As in the case of his 'Sitting Woman' ('Femme assise', figure 5), the limbs of the figure are modelled as if they are made of the same material as the chair. As a result, Giacometti's sculpture oscillates between life and death and is thus dehumanized.



Fig. 5. Alberto Giacometti, *Sitting Woman*, 1948-1950, Bronze, Centre Pompidou.

Giacometti expressed his vision of life and death in "Le Rêve, le Sphinx et la Mort de T." (1995). After a nightmare, the image of his friend Tonio Pototsching, who had passed away in 1946, reappeared in his mind, and the horror of death fell upon him. He began to view living beings,

especially heads, as objects, or “something alive and dead simultaneously” (Giacometti 30). He realized that “all the living things were dead, and this vision repeated itself frequently” (Giacometti 31).

Beckett’s theatrical works reflect a similar process of dehumanization. For instance, the assimilation of living man and dead object in ‘Sitting Woman’ can be linked to the protagonist’s (P) metamorphosis in *Catastrophe*. P stands on a “black block 18 inches high” (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 457), which resembles the plinth of a sculpture. He remains “inert” (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 458) and silent under the pressure of the director (D) and his assistant (A), as A asks, “Sure he won’t utter?”, and D answers, “Not a squeak...” (459). The actions of D and A resemble those of a sculptor modelling his artwork, as also indicated by the following series of requests made by D: “Could do with more nudity”, “Bare the neck” and “The legs. The shins” (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 460). D and A manifest their dominance and absolute control over P by undressing him and bowing his head further and further. Later, A notes down D’s order, “Whiten all flesh” (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 461). These instructions about nudity and monochromaticity underline the correspondence between the human body and a plaster or marble statue. By comparing the director-actor relationship to that of sculptor-sculpture, *Catastrophe* shows how artistic creation, typified by the director’s tyranny, objectifies and dehumanizes a living human body. However, while in the myth of Pygmalion the statue comes to life, Beckett’s protagonist is reduced from a living man to a sculpture. This process blurs the boundary between human being and object, transforming the protagonist into an artwork.

However, not only does the representation of bodies in Beckett’s theatre cross the border between human bodies and objects, but also that between life and death, as shown earlier for Giacometti’s busts or head sculptures on *plateaux*. *Happy Days* and *Play*, in particular, display

intermedial references to such sculptural works. In *Play*, Beckett places “three identical grey urns about one yard high” on the stage, and “[f]rom each a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn’s mouth” (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 307).³ As a container for cremains, the urn symbolizes death. Stuck in the urns, these bodies are literally buried like corpses. The three characters are a man (M), his wife (W1) and his mistress (W2). Their faces are “so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns” (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 307). As we see from the photograph taken by John Haynes during the production at the Royal Court Theatre (figure 6), the faces bear a striking resemblance to Giacometti’s granulated sculptures, as they are covered by muddy cosmetics. This appearance creates the impression that the bodies are decayed, dehumanized, and assimilated to the earth-encrusted urns. As Gontarski states, “the stage image became less a grouping of characters than a set of sculpted icons, a bas-relief triptych” (“De-theatricalizing Theatre” xviii; cf. also Beloborodova and Verhulst 1).

³ The urns are reminiscent of the dustbins in *Endgame* which Nell and Negg inhabit.



Fig. 6. *Play*, the Royal Court Theatre, London, 1976. Photo by John Haynes.

The audience can figure out the story of a love triangle by combining the characters' narratives. Although the plot is structured like a melodrama or a stereotypical romance, the dehumanized bodies in the symbolic urns form a stark contrast with the quotidian monologues. Their "impassive faces" and "toneless voices" (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 307) indicate that they are alive and dead at the same time. In their article on *Play*, Beloborodova and Verhulst have already analysed the piece's shift from the human to the nonhuman in great detail. It could be added that the in-between state of the bodies in *Play* prompts a comparison not just with the funerary sculptures that Beckett appreciated because they "represent the dead [...] neither dead nor alive" (Ariès qtd. in Lozier 104) but also with Giacometti's sculptures and their oscillation between life and death.

An allusion to burial also characterizes *Happy Days*. Winnie is first "embedded up to above her waist in exact centre of the mound" (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 138), then "up to neck" (160). The increasingly precarious positioning of Winnie is reminiscent of Giacometti's busts on their

muddy bases. As time passes, it seems likely that Winnie will be totally buried in the mound, which will become her tomb. Her sinking body visualizes the process of dying. By talking and handling the props, she strives to resume her daily routine and confirm her survival, despite her miserable situation. Sometimes she cannot reach the fallen objects, as “the parasol slips from her grasp and falls behind mound” (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 141). It is a sign that she is losing control of her life. By juxtaposing her dying body with her lively quotidian existence and nostalgic memory, Beckett creates a body alienated from life by the process of entombment.

Allusions to corpses and burials in Beckett’s plays correspond with his preference for funerary statues and reflect the impact of his witnessing of death during WWII. The half-buried bodies in *Happy Days* and *Play* are posed on the threshold of death. They evoke Giacometti’s ‘The Cage’ (‘La Cage’, figure 7) and ‘The Forest’ (‘La Forêt’, figure 8), i.e. compositions of figurines and busts, some of which seem to be sinking into the ground while others remain erect. ‘The Cage’ displays a standing woman and a man’s bust in a theatrical frame; ‘The Forest’ embodies Giacometti’s childhood vision of the forest as immobilized walking figures from a distance.⁴ By assembling the bust and the figurines of various sizes to create an illusion of the forest, Giacometti transforms the organic into inorganic. In both sculptures, the juxtaposition of a bust and a group of standing figures on the same *plateau* invokes the spectre of death, implying that these figures are going through a process of burial or dehumanization, i.e. the very same fate with which Beckettian characters find themselves confronted.

⁴ In his letter to Pierre Matisse on December 28, 1950, Giacometti relates ‘The Forest’ to his childhood memory, as it reminds him of “a corner of the forest seen over many years, where the trees [...] always seemed to resemble figures immobilized in their stride and talking to one another.” Original quote: « Un coin de forêt vu pendant de nombreuses années, et dont les arbres [...] semblaient toujours être comme des personnages immobilisés dans leur marche et qui se parlaient. » (Giacometti 58-59)



Fig. 7. Alberto Giacometti, *The Cage*, 1950, Bronze, Fondation Giacometti, Paris.



Fig. 8. Alberto Giacometti, *The Forest*, 1950, Bronze, Fondation Giacometti, Paris.

The images of immobilized or dying bodies in Beckett's theatre resonate with Giacometti's buried busts, as well as with his vision of being "alive and dead simultaneously" (Giacometti 30). Beckett

adapted the sculptural technique to create lives without life since, in an existentialist sense, his characters are not only physically buried in their tombs, but also metaphorically buried by the meaninglessness of the world. The urns and the mound symbolize their alienation from the world and evoke a sense of absurdity. Even though characters strive to distract themselves from their awareness of death, they are inevitably dying. Yet, as Badiou muses, in Beckett's universe, "'dying' is never death" but rather the "unattainable limit of an increasingly diminishing network" (45). In other words, every existence is failing but never reaches the end of death. Marked by a decayed appearance and buried posture, Beckettian theatrical bodies are damned to oscillate between life and death – or, as Pozzo so aptly puts it in *Waiting for Godot*: "They give birth astride of a grave" (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 83). Nonetheless, confronted with the hostile world and fatality, Beckett's characters choose to come to terms with the process of dying, rather than to die by suicide. By continuing their quotidian lives and repeating their tedious monologues or movements, they endeavor to create meaning out of the meaninglessness, like Camus's absurdist hero Sisyphus. Hence, stage images of buried or coffined figures in Beckett's plays do not only correspond with Giacometti's vision of being, but also illustrate existentialist absurdity. By producing a sculptural effect and evoking Giacometti's composition with figures and heads, Beckett represents the decaying bodies and the process of burial as an embodiment of deteriorating human existence.

Furthermore, Beckett's theatrical bodies also illustrate his view of the inorganic as expressed in his letter to Cissie Sinclair in 1937. When comparing Antoine Watteau with Jack Yeats, he writes: "I suppose to suggest the inorganism of the organic – all his [Watteau's] people are mineral in the end, without possibility of being added to or taken from, pure inorganic juxtapositions" (Beckett qtd. in Fehsenfeld et al. 535). According to Beckett, the stillness in Yeats'

paintings is superior as it bears “[a] kind of petrified insight into one’s ultimate hard irreducible inorganic singleness” (Beckett qtd. in Fehsenfeld et al. 536). Beckett’s inclination toward the inorganic coincides with that of Giacometti. The resonance of the dehumanized figures on the stage with Giacometti’s busts on the *plateaux* sheds light on how Beckett endeavoured to achieve this ‘inorganic singleness’ in theatre by presenting his theatrical bodies as if they are absorbed into inorganic landscapes. His conceptualization of half-buried bodies as central stage images thus enriched and expanded the traditional representation of bodies in the theatre.

4. *Fragmented Bodies*

Another characteristic of the representation of bodies in Beckett’s late plays is fragmentation. Gontarski describes Beckett’s post-*Play* productions as “a theatre of body parts and spectres”, “featuring dismembered or incorporeal creatures” (“De-theatricalizing Theatre” xix). This description is reminiscent of a series of sculptures of mutilated bodies Giacometti created in the late 1940s, continuing the tradition from Rodin. ‘The Nose’ (Figure 9), for instance, presents a suspended head with a slenderized nose piercing through a frame. Remarkably deformed, the head is posed in an unstable balance between the elongated nose and the neck connected to it. The mouth, opening wide, conveys feelings of bewilderment, dread, and anguish. Without any appearance of flesh, the head is more like a skull, portrayed as a dreadful image of death. This sculpture not only evokes the pile of skulls at the concentration camps of WWII but also reflects Giacometti’s opinions on life and death, as described in “Le Rêve, le Sphinx et la Mort de T.”, when he recounts how he dreamt about deceased T. again, “dead, the limbs of a skeletal thinness, projected, scattered, abandoned far from the body, a huge bloated belly, the head thrown back, the mouth open” (29).



Fig. 9. Alberto Giacometti, *Le Nez*, 1947, Painted plaster, string, and metal, Centre Pompidou.

This terrifying vision of the dead accounts for the fragmented bodies, the skeleton shapes, the upturned faces, and the open mouths in his sculptures. Giacometti recalls that, in his dream, the head of the deceased “become[s] an object, a small box, measurable, insignificant” (29). Subsequently, Giacometti began to see the heads in a void. This explains why Giacometti modelled the skulls suspended or held up in the air, detached from the plinth. Liberated from realistic space, they become pure symbols of the residues of being. The traumatic spectacle of death Giacometti dreamt of generates the fragmented and reified corporeality of his sculptures.

In Beckett’s late plays, too, theatrical bodies are reduced to a hand, a mouth, or a skull. *That Time*, for instance, in which a head is suspended in the middle of the dark stage, is reminiscent of Giacometti’s sculptures of skulls. In *That Time*, the spotlight focuses on the protagonist’s face

while he listens to his own voices A, B, and C surrounding him as if they are speaking inside his skull. The head lit in the darkness and the three identical voices transform the physical space into a mental realm, where his mind has scattered into three egos. The listening protagonist almost turns into a head sculpture with eyes closed. However, during the intermittent periods of silence, he opens his eyes and breathes audibly. These signs of awakening or living highlight his oscillation between life and death, human and non-human.

The most significant fragmentation of a body in Beckett's dramatic oeuvre is Mouth in *Not I*. Faintly lit in darkness, Mouth floats above the stage. Throughout the play, it utters an irrational babbling monologue, with the voice of a woman in her sixties. The female voice relates incidents in her life from a third-person perspective. Having been a "speechless infant" (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 376), she cannot recognize her own voice, which she has never heard. Gradually she realizes that the broken sentences are coming from her own mouth, having "no idea what she's saying" (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 380). She, who "could not make a sound" (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 380), cannot stop talking in a maddened way. The brain begs the mouth to pause a moment, but there is no reaction. Having problems of self-cognition, she loses control of her own mind. The dismembered body implies that her self-consciousness has been split into pieces as well. Despite the bodily disintegration and the fact that "human characters were increasingly reduced to mechanical devices or mouthpieces for the conveyance of speech" in Beckett's late plays (Beloborodova and Verhulst 1), Mouth's occasional self-awareness suggests her in-between situation. She feels like her whole body is gone, and only the mouth remains. The image of the talking Mouth evokes Giacometti's vision of an isolated head in the void as a self-sufficient presence, alive and dead simultaneously. There are some appalling implications that the woman is not awake, or even not alive. Her world is "silent as the grave" (Beckett, *Dramatic Works* 378),

except for the buzzing and dull roar in the skull. Such repeated lines turn the stage into the realm of her sub-consciousness or her afterlife. Mouth's physical fragmentation thus visualizes a disintegrated and chaotic state of mind. While Mouth's descent into madness could reflect the mental impact on the victims of WWII, the bodily fragmentation illustrates the physical disintegration of the self in the post-war era.

It was unprecedented for an autonomous body part to play a leading role in a piece of theatre. Resonant with Giacometti's wizened sculptures of skulls, the fragmented bodies in Beckett's theatrical productions, such as Mouth in *Not I*, the isolated head in *That Time*, and the dreamt hands in *Nacht und Träume*, created new ways to represent the body in theatre. As every being in Beckett's plays is failing, degenerating and collapsing, "the debilitated body's incompleteness points to [...] a wholeness never to be gained in Beckett's universe" (Reginio et al. 23). Mutilated, isolated and alienated, the bodies in Beckett's late works evoke Giacometti's sculptures of body parts and thereby push further into the realm of theatrical abstraction and symbolization.

Conclusion

De-individualized, fragile, buried, and fragmented, the bodies in Beckett's plays blur the boundary between the organic and the inorganic. Beckett's stage images of half-buried bodies and isolated body parts can be interpreted as intermedial references to Giacometti's compositions of assembled figures and busts and to his sculptures of fragmented bodies. Innovating the visualization of theatrical bodies, Beckett's stage images broadened the representational mode of theatre. While previous research has largely attributed Beckett's innovative staging of bodies to his views on visual arts (Knowlson and Haynes, Lloyd, Carville) or his fascination with funerary sculpture (Lozier) and inorganic portraits (Belobodorova and Verhulst), this article demonstrates that

Beckett's theatrical bodies bear a striking resemblance to Giacometti's post-war sculptures. Dwelling in the realm between life and death, the dreadful forms of the bodies envisioned by both artists can be traced back to their traumatic wartime experience and their personal witnessing of death. Enduring illness, destitution and essentialist absurdity, Beckettian theatrical bodies are moving on under the everlasting imperative of *The Unnamable* – “You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 407) – just like Giacometti's walking figures. Achieving a sculptural effect and echoing Giacometti's vision, Beckett's bodies open up a metaphysical dimension and function as symbols of existence. Simultaneously alive and dead, the failing bodies in Beckett's theatre represent a dehumanized corporeality and depict deteriorating subjectivities that descend endlessly towards the ultimate end.

Works Cited

- Badiou, Alain, et al. *On Beckett*. Clinamen, 2004.
- Beckett, Samuel. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. Faber and Faber, 1990.
- . *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Grove Press, 2009.
- Beloborodova, Olga, and Pim Verhulst. "Human Machines Petrified: *Play*'s Mineral Mechanics and *Les statues meurent aussi*." *Journal of Beckett Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2019, pp. 179-96.
- Blin, Roger. *Roger Blin, souvenirs et propos recueillis par Lynda Bellity Peskine*. Gallimard, 1986.
- Carville, Conor. *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge UP, 2018.
- Cohn, Ruby. *Just Play: Beckett's Theater*. Princeton UP, 1980.
- Craig, George et al., editors. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Vol. 2, 1941-1956*. Cambridge UP, 2011.
- . *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Vol. 3, 1957-1965*. Cambridge UP, 2014.
- Dufrêne, Thierry. *Alberto Giacometti: les dimensions de la réalité*. Skira, 1994.
- . *Le Journal de Giacometti*. Hazan, 2007.
- Elleström, Lars, editor. *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Fehsenfeld, Martha et al., editors. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Vol. 1, 1929-1940*. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Gaggi, Silvio. "Sculpture, Theater and Art Performance: Notes on the Convergence of the Arts." *Leonardo*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1986, pp. 45-52.
- Giacometti, Alberto. *Écrits, prés. par Michel Leiris et Jacques Dupin*. Hermann, 1995.

- Gontarski, Stanley E., editor. "De-theatricalizing Theatre: The Post-Play Plays." *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Volume IV: The Shorter Plays: With Revised Texts for Footfalls, Come and Go and What Where*. Faber and Faber, 1999, pp. xv-xxvii.
- . "The No Against the Nothingness." *Samuel Beckett: Endgame. With a Revised Text*. Faber and Faber, 1992.
- , editor. *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Volume IV. The Shorter Plays: With Revised Texts for Footfalls, Come and Go and What Where*. Faber and Faber, 1999.
- Heathcote, Christopher. "When Beckett Commissioned Giacometti." *Quadrant online*, www.quadrant.org.au/magazine/2013/01-02/when-beckett-commissioned-giacometti/#:~:text=Several%20years%20later%2C%20when%20the,happy%2C%E2%80%9D%20Samuel%20Beckett%20began. 1 Jan. 2013.
- Knowlson, James. "Beckett the Tourist: Bamberg and Würzburg." *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All*, edited by Linda Ben-Zvi and Angela Moorjani, Oxford UP, 2008, pp. 16-31.
- . *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. Bloomsbury, 1996.
- , and John Haynes. *Images of Beckett*. Cambridge UP, 2003.
- , and Dougald McMillan, editors. *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: Waiting for Godot*. Grove Press, 2019.
- Lloyd, David. *Beckett's Thing: Painting and Theatre*. Edinburgh UP, 2016.
- Lord, James. *Giacometti: A Biography*. Phoenix Giant, 1996.
- Lozier, Claire. "Samuel Beckett's Funerary Sculpture." *Questions of Influence in Modern French Literature*, edited by T. Baldwin et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 99-110.
- Mathews, Timothy. *Alberto Giacometti: The Art of Relation*. I. B. Tauris. 2014.
- Megged, Matti. *Dialogue in the Void: Beckett and Giacometti*. Lumen, 1992.

- Milz, Manfred. *Samuel Beckett und Alberto Giacometti: Das Innere als Oberfläche*. Königshausen & Neumann, 2006.
- Nixon, Mark. *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-1937*. Bloomsbury, 2011.
- Oppenheim, Lois. *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art*. U of Michigan P, 2000.
- Rajewsky, Irina O. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality." *Intermédialités*, no. 6, 2011, pp. 43-64.
- Reginio, Robert, et al. *Samuel Beckett and Contemporary Art*. Ibidem Press, 2017.
- Robinson, Fred Miller. "'An Art of Superior Tramps': Beckett and Giacometti." *The Centennial Review*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1981, pp. 331-44.
- Sollars, Michael D. "Kafkaesque Absurdity in the Aesthetics of Beckett and Giacometti." *Enthymema*, no. VIII, 2013, pp. 71-82.