

Beckett's Drama

**Mis-Movements and the
Aesthetics of Gesture**

Charlotta P. Einarsson



SAMUEL BECKETT
IN COMPANY, vol. 9

ibidem

Charlotta P. Einarsson

Beckett's Drama

Mis-Movements and the Aesthetics of Gesture

SAMUEL BECKETT IN COMPANY

Edited by Paul Stewart

ISSN 2365-3809

- 1 *Llewellyn Brown*
Beckett, Lacan and the Voice
With a foreword by Jean-Michel Rabaté
ISBN 978-3-8382-0819-0
(Paperback edition)
ISBN 978-3-8382-0939-5
(Hardcover edition)
- 2 *Robert Reginio, David Houston Jones, and Katherine Weiss (eds.)*
Samuel Beckett and
Contemporary Art
ISBN 978-3-8382-0849-7
- 3 *Charlotta P. Einarsson*
A Theatre of Affect
The Corporeal Turn in Samuel Beckett's
Drama
ISBN 978-3-8382-1068-1
- 4 *Rhys Tranter*
Beckett's Late Stage
Trauma, Language, and Subjectivity
ISBN 978-3-8382-1035-3
- 5 *Llewellyn Brown*
Beckett, Lacan and the Gaze
ISBN 978-3-8382-1239-5
- 6 *Paul Stewart & David Pattie (eds.)*
Pop Beckett
Intersections with Popular Culture
ISBN 978-3-8382-1193-0
- 7 *Andy Wimbush*
Still: Samuel Beckett's Quietism
ISBN 978-3-8382-1369-9
- 8 *Lucy Jeffery*
Transdisciplinary Beckett
Visual Arts, Music, and the Creative
Process
ISBN 978-3-8382-1584-6
- 9 *Charlotta P. Einarsson*
Beckett's Drama
Mis-Movements and the Aesthetics of
Gesture
ISBN 978-3-8382-1298-2

Charlotta P. Einarsson

BECKETT'S DRAMA

Mis-Movements and the Aesthetics of Gesture

ibidem
Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-7298-6

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Hannover-Stuttgart 2024

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronical, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

For Ishrat Lindblad who told me to trust the authenticity of my own voice.

Let “found” or “made” mean as they work here as Beckett finds and makes us. Once we are “made” in Beckett's way, we say “oh yes,” that always “was,” we always “were” that way. But this “was” is retroactive. Only afterward does that seem to have been there before. Imagination makes and then something “was.” How imagination works this way defines this “made,” this “found,” and “was.” ... But you will have noticed that when I rejected an old concept of “imagination,” I had something else to point to, instead. I called on you to let the word mean as it worked. I said we could let “magination” mean how Beckett wrote and what his characters do to us.

EUGENE GENDLIN (1985)

It is one thing for an artist to lack talent of vision and thus to make mistakes or make poorly through lack of skill, or time. But it is another to do what Beckett did: to mismake *on purpose*, to mismake *by design*—and to do so not to denigrate oneself, or one's audience, nor even to reconnect with a child or a savage within, but from the belief that such mismaking is in the interest of art and will shape its future.

LELAND DE LA DURANTAYE (2016)

Table of contents

List of Abbreviations	XI
Preface	XIII
Acknowledgements	XV
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Up	31
Chapter 2 Sideways	83
Chapter 3 Down	139
Conclusion.....	191
Bibliography.....	205
Index	215

List of Abbreviations

TN I The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Vol I

TN II The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Vol II

TN III The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Vol III

TN IV The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Vol IV

Preface

This book is a revision of my thesis, “Mis-Movements: The Aesthetics of Gesture in Samuel Beckett’s Drama” (2012, Stockholm University), which focused on the significance of the idiosyncratic movements and gestures that Beckett’s characters perform, *viz.* mis-movements. My interest in mis-movements was generated partly by phenomenology and partly by my previous experience as a dancer. Going back to revise this text more than a decade later has entailed travelling back in time to recall what I was trying to convey but could not then explain. It has also entailed identifying and unpacking ideas merely implied in the thesis, once again facing the limits of my own thinking. Yet, then as now, it is precisely such thinking from the edges of one’s ideas that makes the carrying forward of ideas possible.

The phrase ‘carrying forward’ is taken from Eugene Gendlin’s ‘new phenomenology’ (2004). According to Gendlin, the process of carrying forward is “a deliberate way to think and speak with what is more than categories (concepts, theories, assumptions, distinctions . . .)” (2004, 127). It is a way to think from that which exceeds the words we use and so it is a way to think with “the excess” that constitutes “our situated experiencing in the world” (Gendlin 2004, 28). The excess or felt sense is *always already* meaningful even as we cannot describe it at first, let alone explain it. Yet, “[i]f we do not have the felt meaning of the concept, we haven’t got the concept at all—only a verbal noise. Nor can we think without felt meaning” (Gendlin 1997, 5–6). Thus, it is only because the felt sense exceeds language that it is possible to know and feel *more than* one is able to say. The process by means of which experience arrives to be conceptualized necessarily involves carrying felt sense forward, and in Gendlin’s phenomenology this important insight is rendered as an ellipsis comprising five dots “(.....)” (1997, xi).

In revising my thesis, then, I have been working with the assumption that mis-movements mean something *more than* and *other than* what I previously was able to say. At the point in time when I was

writing the thesis, the concepts I used seemed appropriate enough to the task of investigating mis-movements, but my understanding of those concepts did not quite capture my felt sense of their significance. As a result, my thinking about mis-movements remained a kind of *knowing without ta concept*. In fact, whatever conclusions there were in the thesis, I owed to my supervisors, most notably to Ishrat Lindblad, but also to Matthew Feldman and to Richard Begam, who generously agreed to read the thesis in its final stages. Revising the text has therefore involved thinking from old ideas in ways that imply new ideas. The difficulty is merely knowing when to stop thinking, writing, and editing etc. Words are essentially incomplete and, perhaps while striving to convey senses, using them pushes one to produce *more than* one intended: more and new perspectives, ideas, openings, difficulties, complexities, intricacies etc. Indeed, carrying forward never stops, and on that note, ‘.....’.

Stockholm 21st November 2023
Charlotta Palmstierna Einarsson

Acknowledgements

This book has been long in the making and there is simply no way for me to thank all of those who have inspired my thinking and so contributed to shape the book.

That said, I owe the opportunity of getting it published to specific individuals, namely to Matthew Feldman, who suggested that I should revise my thesis for publication; to Jonathan Bignell and Ulrika Maude, who both kindly agreed to endorse my book proposal in 2017; to Paul Stewart who, in his capacity as editor for the Beckett in Company Series, accepted it; and to Jessica Haunschild at *ibidem* Verlag for her kind and sustained support in the long process of revision. Thanks also to Christoph Ohlwärther and the editorial team at *Ibidem* Verlag for proofreading and indexing the book.

I also owe a very special debt of gratitude to my former supervisor Ishrat Lindblad, to whom this book is dedicated. Ishrat, you were and remain a guiding light, not merely for your erudite, sincere, and honest perspectives on all matters academic, but also for your mindful, considerate, and wise approach to life. Thank you for the loving kindness and attention you always found time to give in moments when I needed it most. Thanks for showing me the way to critically challenge my own ideas. I remain forever in your debt.

Many thanks also to my friends and colleagues Vicky Angelaki, Helen Asklund, Beyza Björkman, Michalea Castellanos, Elisabet Dellming, Carina Hermansson, Lena Jadekrantz, Marina Ludwigs, Raffaella Negretti, Anita Rakoczy, Anna-Pya Sjödin, Sonia York-Pryce, and Pieter Vermeulen. I am lucky to have you around.

Thanks to my friends Anne Sandblad, Tina Sandvik and Guiditta Arnese. You are in my heart.

Thanks Lena Haag, for introducing me to Wagner.

Thanks to the ETHER team led by Maggie Kubanyiova, Angela Creese, and Parinita Shetty. I am very grateful to have been invited into your encouraging and supportive circle.

Thank you, Cintya Andrea Floriani, for inspiring me to think about diversity and for inspiring me to ‘be like water’.

Thank you, Annette Balaam, for inspirational conversations on Beckett’s multiverse.

Thanks Jane Bennett and William Connolly for coming to the Autonomy Conference at Stockholm University in 2016. Your generous open-mindedness remains an inspiration.

Finally, to my family, pets included: you have helped me tremendously in thinking about the ideas presented in this book. The walks, the talks, the coffees, the support, the distractions (.....). Thanks for always being there for me. Much love.

Introduction

This book examines the incongruous, often highly formalised movements of the body in Samuel Beckett's drama, which I have labelled 'mis-movements' (Einarsson 2009; 2012). The body in Beckett's theatre is relentlessly made to break with what would appear to be more realistic modes of comportment. For instance, the idiosyncratic walking that many characters display exemplifies a kind of moving that draws attention to its own execution, as well as to the body as the locus of these activities, see for instance Krapp's "*laborious walk*" in *Krapp's Last Tape* (TN III 3:14), Clov's excessive, "*stiff, staggering walk*" in *Endgame* (TN II 3:12), and May's slow pacing and turning in *Footfalls* (TN IV, 292). Elsewhere, I have chosen to label such conspicuous moving 'mis-movement' (see Einarsson 2009, 14; 2017, 16).¹ By that term, I have sought to describe the function of physical movements in Beckett's plays as a means to foreground the body in order to problematize the concepts of perception and meaning-making and, finally, as a way to entirely resist comprehension. Mis-movements in Beckett's drama, I have suggested, should be understood as sensuous rather than intelligible manifestations of Beckett's poetic theatre (see Einarsson 2017 38, 65, 114, 120). In this book, however, I examine Beckett's use of mis-movements, not merely as part of a strategy to escape the confines of meaning in language, but as an instrument of artistic expression that upholds intellectual freedom.

In a sense, the use of mis-movements constitutes a phenomenological, heuristic solution to the problem of presentation and representation that Beckett explicitly addresses already in the early

¹ Examples of movements and gestures in this book are taken from *The Theatrical Notebooks*, volumes 1–4. According to the typographical standards of these editions, "[t]ext between square brackets [] has been added to the original English text. Text between pointed brackets { } has been revised. A pair of angle brackets < > indicates that a section of text has been cut from the original English text" (see TN I, 6).

1930s.² Notably, however, the mis-movements that Beckett's characters perform in his early drama are different from the mis-movements that characters perform in his middle and late dramas, and I connect this shift to their rhetorical function in performance. If initially mis-movements afford Beckett with a solution to attack and undermine language (cf. his oft-cited letter to Axel Kaun), then over time, mis-movements become poetic devices that solicit an almost ethical call to engage with the characters' embodied situations, which seem driven by need rather than accident. I have previously suggested that mis-movements could be approached as 'emergent or 'ontogenetic' phenomena, that is, "phenomena that are dependent on the techniques that produce them (for example, isolation, stasis, fragmentation, *dys*-appearance)" (Einarsson 2017, 169). Here, however, I return to address such ontogenetic phenomena, *viz.* mis-movements, as more precise experiences than the words used to describe them. Moreover, in Beckett's drama, I shall move on to suggest, and especially his late drama, the combination of mis-movements into patterns on a higher level of abstraction constitutes a poetic logic whereby the performance context is reconfigured from a context for interpretation to a context for aesthetic experience, a poetic logic that also holds the seed to intellectual freedom.

The question of how mis-movements arrive to be meaningfully grasped in the context of performance opens a variety of perspectives on the interconnections between sense and sense-making such as, for instance, the role of memory in experience or the question of how embodied experience is meaningfully grasped as an encounter. Taken as a whole, there is a high level of integration between the different parts that make up Beckett's drama, and looking at mis-movements therefore open a range of perspectives on the interaction between various phenomena as key to sense-making. Looking specifically at the embodied conditions for experiencing mis-

² See Beckett's article "Recent Irish Poetry" published 1934 under the pseudonym 'Andrew Belis' (Knowlson 1996, 180), and reprinted in *Disjecta* (1983).

movements in the context of Beckett's drama, however, I argue that mis-movements are instrumental to Beckett's reconfiguration of the performance context, and so that they are key to Beckett's development as director of his own drama. But I also suggest that the aesthetics of gesture in Beckett's drama safeguards an ethics of knowing. Indeed, that it affords a creative solution to the predicament of expression with aesthetic, as well as rhetorical and ethical implications. In the process of explaining such claims, I shall be referring to some of Beckett's plays to illustrate and exemplify my points. My aim, however, is not to discuss individual plays or explain the significance of the body in individual performances. Rather, it is to approach Beckett's stage directions from the perspective that they tacitly convey Beckett's transformation as a playwright, and that mis-movements are key to this transformation.

To this effect, I shall be engaging with Eugene Gendlin's process model of thinking, Gregory Bateson's ecological criteria for mental process, William James's and John Dewey's pragmatic aesthetics, and Mark Johnson's embodied aesthetics, all of which open perspectives for rethinking the interpretative frame of performance as ecology, and specifically with reference to the effects produced by mis-movements within this context. However, also Drew Leder (*The Absent Body*, 2009) and Sara Ahmed (*Queer Phenomenology*, 2016) afford useful perspectives on the issue of interpretation in the context of Beckett's drama. What Gendlin, Bateson, James, Dewey, Johnson, Leder and Ahmed (to name but a few,) arguably have in common, is an understanding that thinking cannot be separated from embodied experience, nor concepts, feelings, attitudes etc., from the contexts in which they occur, or from the phenomenal experiencing body. The interconnections between body and mind theorized in their work, respectively, will therefore help me shed light on the significance of mis-movements in Beckett's drama, and on the significance of the aesthetics of gesture for the process of understanding Beckett's innovative stage presentations.

Furthermore, my discussions of mis-movements in this book are aligned with studies that pay attention to the body in Beckett's

drama, with studies that acknowledge the specificity of embodied experience for the event of interpretation, and with studies that acknowledge the dynamic and open-ended nature of interpretation. My focus on mis-movements should also be seen to participate in an ongoing re-evaluation of the recurrent motifs of the substance of thought, and on the relation between perception and cognition in Beckett's creative and critical work (see for example, Daniel Koczy *Beckett, Deleuze and Performance*, 2018, and Tim Lawrence *Beckett's Critical Aesthetics*, 2018). Clearly, Beckett's work affords fertile ground for studies seeking to understand the grounds on which drama continues to be a relevant conduit for human experience, and critical writings derived from such perspectives have therefore inspired my work in this book, as I hope to inspire others to probe into this rich field of research.³

Premises

To pave the ground for my discussions I begin with a tautological description of the role and function of the body in Beckett's drama: if the stage-directions collected in *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* detail idiosyncratic movements and gesture (*vis*; mis-movements), then such idiosyncratic movements and gestures (mis-movements) must have specific functions within the context of performance.⁴ This simple premise underlies the

³ For instance, Beckett's reconfiguration of the subject-object relation invites consideration of the intersection of scientific and humanistic reasoning, as well as considerations of the third meaning-type of imagery that accompanies conceptualisations of ideas (whether auditory or visual), or the kind of theory welded in practice. Indeed, following Beckett in revisiting the foundations for perception, thinking, and meaning-making may entail rethinking the kind of questions asked within different contexts, illuminating the commonalities and differences between epistemologies, thereby paving the ground for multi- and interdisciplinary dialogues.

⁴ Bateson's definition of a tautology is that it is "a body of propositions so linked together that the links between the propositions are necessarily valid" (2002, 78).

discussions in this book. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, it also underlies the propositions that I shall ultimately arrive at, namely that neither the aesthetics of gesture in Beckett's drama, nor the poetic logic of Beckett's strategic use of mis-movements, has anything to do with the concrete body in performance. Even though the stage directions are key to understanding the aesthetics of gesture in Beckett's drama, the specific movements that they detail are not relevant *per se*. Admittedly, different mis-movements will always generate different interactions, and so ostensibly it does matter which mis-movements are being foregrounded. Yet any performance adhering to the poetic logic of mis-movements (even if it emphasizes 'new' mis-movements,) would bear the mark of Beckett's creative vision, which arguably derives from the understanding that our habitual tendencies to grasp meaning in language obliterate creative, holistic, and even artistic perception. It also derives from realizing that curiosity is that mood of attention within which perception is homed. Indeed, if the issue of perception is key to understanding the poetic logic of mis-movements, as described in the stage directions, then mis-movements are key to perception. Mis-movements liberate spectators to see the world differently. But mis-movements also invite spectators to think differently about the potential meanings perceived. That is, mis-movements invite spectators to re-connect with embodied experience as that realm wherein new modes of thinking about the world emerges—modes of thinking that propose themselves, as it were, as if already there to be perceived, as afterthoughts to experience, and as occurrences to be carried forward into the future. Consequently, any performance that operationalizes Beckett's aesthetics of gesture by attending to mis-movements would be adhering to an underlying poetic logic that solicits intellectual freedom.

Doting

Beckett's meticulous attention to the body in performance is noteworthy. As evidenced by the careful descriptions of the characters' gestures and postures in the stage directions, Beckett dotes

on the body, and even his prose is unparalleled in rendering chaotic physical experience idiosyncratic shape. As an artistic practice, Jane Bennett explains, 'doting' is, "a stylized mode of encounter, in real time and face-to-face with things. But doting is also a particular kind of linguistic description. It solicits a language-practice that shapes and elevates—writes *up*—lived impressions" (2020, 65–66). Discussing the way Walt Whitman practices doting, Bennett warns that doting may easily be warded off as an essentially aesthetic practice, one that merely foregrounds sensation over sense (2020, 68). However, according to Bennett, Whitman does not merely practice doting to foreground sensation: he also dotes to highlight the material chosen for artistic creation, specifically to 'rescue' it from "the status of pure passivity" (2020, 68). For example, in "Song of the Open Road", "stones (and paths, curbs ferries roofs)" are revealed to "add a twist" to the poetic speaker's perception of the world (2020, 68).⁵ The practice of doting brings out new and different qualities and meanings. That is, doting brings out new and different images, which could be seen to transform the reader's understanding of the world.

Importantly, however, Whitman also dotes to bring perhaps more sinister aspects of the world to the fore. Thus, the "attention to detail" in "I Sing the Body Electric", according to Bennett, "shamelessly shines a light on the wondrous quality of the human bodies on display", ostensibly "in lieu of an overt repudiation of the moral horror of a slave auction" (2020, 69). Even as Whitman could be seen to "favor an inspirational over a polemical rhetoric", the "contrast between the beauty of bodies and the horror of the social situation", as well as the attention to the "exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck and volition" of the bodies on display, effectively "links the value of each body-soul to the inestimably great worth of the 'diffuse float' from which each has 'cohered'" (Bennett 2020, 70). More than merely rescuing the human body from being reduced to "an

⁵ A few lines earlier Bennett explains that in Whitman's poetry "[p]ave and promenade, clinks and jokes, metal badge and excited crowd, impassive stones and exclaiming women—each is worthy of dote" (2020, 66).