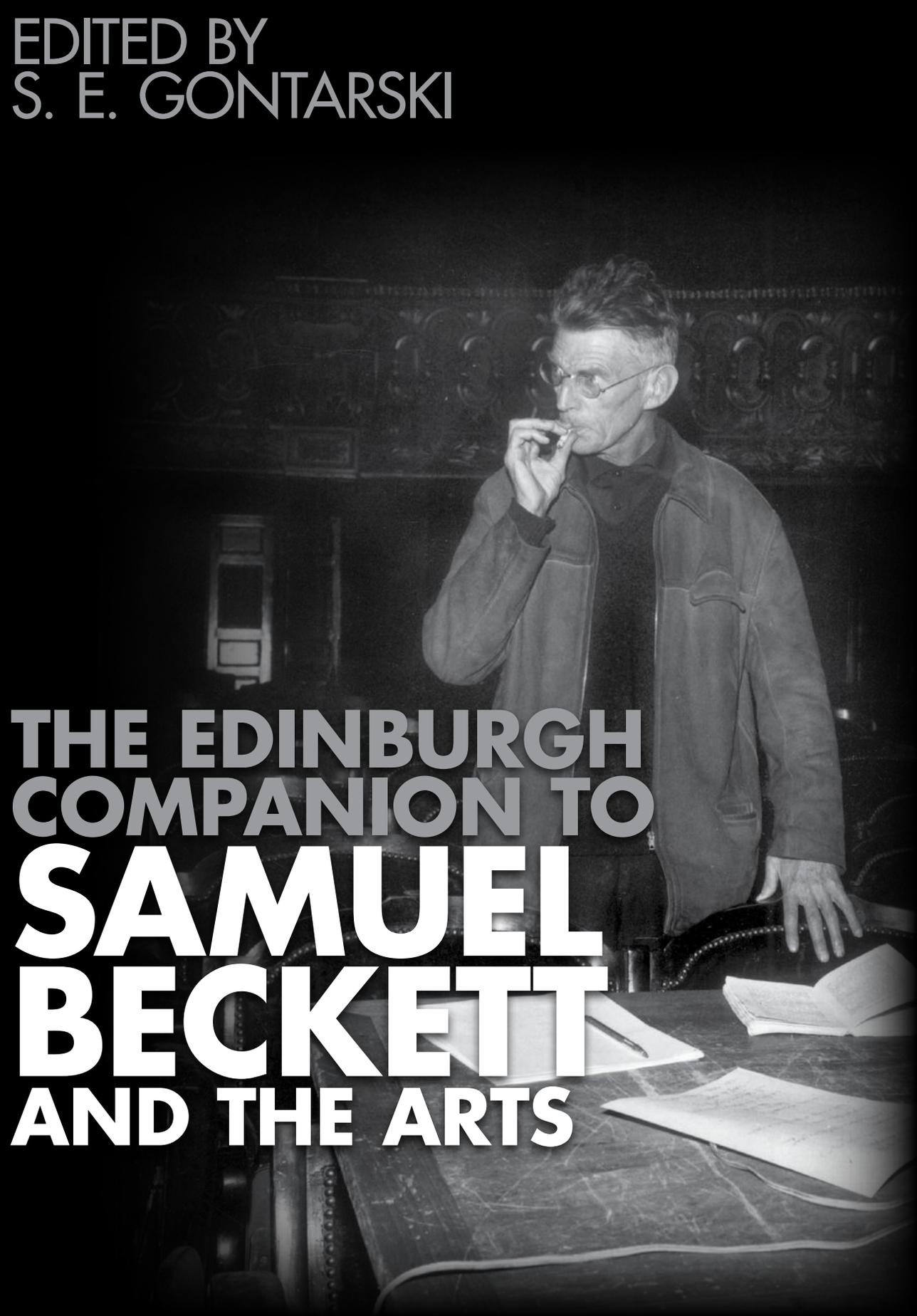


EDITED BY  
S. E. GONTARSKI



**THE EDINBURGH  
COMPANION TO  
SAMUEL  
BECKETT  
AND THE ARTS**

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EDITED BY S. E. GONTARSKI

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## ‘FACING OTHER WINDOWS’: BECKETT IN BRAZIL

*Fábio de Souza Andrade*

IF ABLE TO catch an architectonic glimpse of the Brazilian reception of Samuel Beckett in the last seventy years magically converted into a building, as life itself is in George Perec’s *La vie, mode d’emploi*, the discreet observer – an outer-space intelligence, let us say – would face a very eclectic but lively construction. Had he the time and leisure, it would not be impossible to extract a few reasonably consistent and understandable patterns out of these rear-window visions. Most of them, though, would be built upon aporetic foundations, just the same as Beckett’s work itself.

From the very early press reviews (major Brazilian critics witnessed *Godot’s* first season at the Babylone) to the first semi-amateur local productions, the language barrier certainly played a decisive role in the way Beckett has been read and assimilated in Brazil. His scholar’s interest in Romance languages and literatures never grew into a formal knowledge of Portuguese (despite James Knowlson’s brief mention of his approval of Fernando Pessoa, whose poetry he might have tried to read in the original). His connections to Italian and Spanish literatures, let alone French, are therefore of quite a different kind, with no Dante or Calderón de la Barca presiding over them when it comes to Portugal and Brazil.

Obviously, the history of Brazilian critical response to his works partially coincides with the editorial fortune of the translations, the varying tide of theatrical productions and the growing number of academic publications, all of them deserving an exhaustive inventory, such as those provided for other countries by Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman in *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett* (Continuum, 2009). Nevertheless, the crucial issue is to investigate what in a work so deeply rooted in the long European history and recent experience appeals to artists and readers of a brand new nation, already decaying before reaching the apogee, as Claude Lévi-Strauss described Brazil in *Tristes tropiques* (Omnibus, 1976), his memoir of São Paulo.

This encounter between a new beginning and a final term of a long development is a constant in Brazilian culture and the violation of a Beckettian motto, ‘no symbols where none intended’, imperative. To extract unpredictable consequences out of Western modernist drives is a way of affirming a local identity and the melting pot has been a current (and accurate) metaphor to describe the process. Beckett’s *oeuvre*, prestigious authorial image and challenging formal procedures will thus assume multiple functions in tentative elaboration of local artistic forms. Instead of talking about a Brazilian Beckett, one should have in mind the notion of Brazilian Becketts, similar to

the many *Beckett's Dantes* (Manchester University Press, 2008) studied by Daniela Caselli.

The rising of the primitive one, chronologically correspondent to the acclaiming of *Godot*, has already been largely discussed by a Brazilian director, Robson Corrêa de Camargo, in two recent papers.<sup>1</sup> Just a couple of years following Roger Blin's Parisian production, in July 1955, Alfredo Mesquita (1907–86) directed a cast of drama students from EAD (Escola de Arte Dramática), in a well received short season of the play, which immediately lead to a professional staging at the TBC (Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia). Mesquita, the EAD and the TBC were all connected, to some extent, in the creation of the first Brazilian University, USP, about two decades before, in São Paulo.<sup>2</sup>

The university project – conceived after the Humboldt University model, associating teaching and research – relied on the invitation of some distinguished European thinkers (still very young, such as Fernand Braudel, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Giuseppe Ungaretti). The inspiration was that of promoting an *aggiornamento* of the local debate, which ultimately created unforeseen systematic interest and scientific consideration of Brazilian social, aesthetic and political impasses. At first, however, the students seemed to be more familiar and at ease when confronted with international matters than with Brazilian mixed historical experiences. Mesquita's company repertoire suggests much of this respectful, refined, but not really daring attitude. They remained attached to classical plays (Musset, Molière, Shakespeare), performing very few modern authors (Tennessee Williams, for instance), and even fewer Brazilian playwrights.

In this context, Beckett first presents himself in Brazil less as the defying 'last modernist' and much more as an imported Parisian *demier cri*. Penetrating as the first rare academic responses to his work motivated by the Mesquita's 1955 production may be, they deal with Beckett within a frame of philosophical topics directly taken from contemporary European Beckettian reception. Evoking Parisian existentialism, mentioning the unique combination of comic and tragic in the play, those critics still looked for a positive meaning in his plots and formal experiments, their approach at once reverential and suspicious.<sup>3</sup>

Fourteen years later, another Brazilian Beckett is given birth to, not only due to a change in the readers' approach, but also to the Irish writer's new position in the World Republic of Letters, as Pascale Casanova would put it. Brazilian leading actress, a former member of TBC and EAD, Cacilda Becker (1921–69), who directed a company and owned a theatre bearing her name, played Estragon and Walmor Chagas, her partner and husband, Vladimir, in a production that opened on 17 March 1969. The new translation of *Waiting for Godot*, by Flávio Rangel (1934–88), the play's director, met the demands of a text from a now canonical and veteran dramatist. On the edge of winning the Nobel Prize, Beckett was not only an evidently superb artist, but one likely to attract public attention and to shed intellectual prestige even upon those who still knew only a tiny part of the complex territory of his works.

The season was tragically interrupted and the production acquired a mythical reputation in Brazil. During an intermission, practically on stage, Cacilda Becker suffered the rupture of an aneurysm, which eventually killed her after forty days in hospital. Anyway, this started a curious Brazilian tradition, that of having women playing Beckettian male roles. It seems that Beckett's vigilant eyes could not control all that took place so distantly, in the tropics.

Under the tightening pressure of a military dictatorship, particularly in the following fifteen years, the Brazilian cultural scene was limited by a compulsory political resistance

and the need to avoid the constant restraints imposed by the censors. Due to his immediate political implications, Brecht was favoured as the most evident model for engaging formal experiments in local dramaturgy. Beckett's reception in Brazil still suffers the side effects of this polarised perspective, in which the two greatest playwrights of the twentieth century have been understood, taking them for incompatible creators.

At the same time, the contrivance and bringing up to date of the formal principles of Brazilian modernism (namely the mix of literary genres, an inclination for breaking boundary-lines between different arts and artistic genres, a taste for shock and rupture) and subjects (an investigation into the clash between an international avant-gardist language and local material, a philosophical diffidence in language as a vehicle for knowledge) was the taking form of an organised and irreverent aesthetic current – Tropicalismo – which claimed an anthropophagic, syncretic, ritual devouring of European culture and values, making them new by means of a mixture absorbing traditional, popular Brazilian art.

Two of the greatest theatre personalities in Brazil, Antunes Filho (1929) and José Celso Martinez Corrêa (1937), first met Beckett's work in this context. Closer to the Brechtian approach and responsible for a much appraised stage adaptation of *Macunaíma*, a rhapsodic novel whose eponymous hero incarnates the Brazilian journey from archaic to modern worries, Antunes Filho produced an all-women version of *Waiting for Godot*, which premiered in October 1977. In the absence of a clear key to interpretation, the openness of the Beckettian form was taken as the pretext for a clearly political reading of the play, stressing the social and the violent verbal bonds fundamental between Pozzo and Lucky, the uncertainty and fear of Vladimir and Estragon's emptied expectancy, devoid of hope.

As for Zé Celso, a deliberately outrageous director, when adapting Cacilda Becker's biography to the stage, he incorporated the whole opening scene of *Godot*, performed without significant changes, as his play's overture. If the climactic moment of the actress's professional life coincided with the 1969 production of *Godot* interrupted by her aneurysm, Zé Celso took advantage of the situation in the following forty days in which the actress lay in a coma to explore, in flashes, back and forth in time, in a non-naturalistic plot, her iconic figure as a representation of Brazilian peculiarities.

The play's characters (the messenger boy, Godot himself) assume in *Cacilda!* new faces, allegorical values, intimately combined with mythical and historical Brazilian references. It must be emphasised that the playhouse in which his epic productions take place, Uzyna Uzona, is very unique, planned by Lina Bo Bardi, a distinguished modernist architect, as a setting for drama as a total experience and his plays not only involve audience interaction, but also a very extended running time, each lasting several hours in a row.

During the 1980s, as the military regime lost its power and the transition to democracy prospered, Brazilians could rediscover Beckett from several new points of view. In the last thirty years, an editorial history of Beckett in Brazilian Portuguese began and, as far as theatrical life is concerned, one can even identify different schools of interpretation to his work and families of Beckettian actors and directors, very diverse among themselves.

Some, like Gerald Thomas (1954), a 'Brazilian/Englishman' who adapted *All Strange Away* for the stage in the United States (1984), have built a Brazilian reputation inseparable from the author of *The Unnamable*, even though they have written plays of their own. Much of a polemist, Thomas moved back to Rio, in 1985, and produced '4 X Beckett' in the same year. He worked in straight collaboration with his then wife,

Daniela Thomas, a talented scenographer, responsible for much of the impact his stagings obtained. In New York, for example, an ingenious ten-foot sided glass cube, partially transparent, partially mirrored, trapping the protagonist of *All Strange Away*, eventually replicated in miniature, helped him to successfully meet the enormous challenges of dramatising Beckett's late prose, the 'closed space' narrative.<sup>4</sup>

In 1990, while the first bombings of Baghdad took place, Thomas directed his *Fim de jogo* (*Endgame*), again having actresses to play Hamm and Clov. About a decade later, he adapted passages of Beckett's novels sewn together under the pretext of a woman journalist talking to herself while waiting to interview Beckett (*Esperando Beckett*, 2001). The role was played by a very well known Brazilian TV host, Marília Gabriela, acting for the first time. Controversial as he may be, Thomas imposes for the first time another set of issues concerning Beckett (such as the transposition of his fiction to drama), which tend to refocus, for good and evil, local attention in the contemporary and globalised discussion of his works.

Curiously, in Brazil, as in France, England or Italy, Beckett always attracts the very best of local actors and, particularly, actresses. Madeleine Rénaud, Peggy Ashcroft, Billie Whitelaw and Irene Worth have their counterparts in Cacilda Becker and Fernanda Montenegro (1929), Silver Bear in Berlin for *Central Station*, in 1998, who memorably played Winnie in *Dias felizes* (*Happy Days*) twice: first in 1970 joined by Sadi Cabral's Willie, and then in 1986, along with her husband, Fernando Torres; meanwhile Roger Blin, Jack McGowran and Patrick Magee have their counterparts in Sérgio Britto (1923–2011), who also played Krapp more than once, and Linneu Dias, who took part in a lot of Beckett's 'dramaticules' productions, always invited by another remarkable director, Rubens Rusche.

Extremely faithful to his aesthetic quest, strictly observant of his technical demands in the final plays, Rusche first directed *Katastrophe*, in 1986, a reunion of four short plays in celebration of Beckett's eighty years (*Eu não / Not I*, *Comédia / Comedy*, *Cadeira de balanço / Rockaby* and *Catastrophe*). Many other Beckettian productions came one after another: *Fim de jogo* (1996), *Aquela vez / That Time* and *Solo / A Piece of Monologue* (2000), *Crepúsculo / Twilight*, *Solo / A Piece of Monologue*, *Passos / Footfalls*, *Improvisado de Ohio / Ohio Improptu* (2007). Rusche is a superb light designer and very sensitive to the visual aspects of the dramaticules and their mixture of lyrical poetry, narration and drama, memory, imagination and physicality.

Not only has Beckett frequently meditated on the imaginative process from the point of view of a fine connoisseur of the visual arts – in his essays, notebooks and correspondence – but he has often inspired the imagination of composers, choreographers, video artists and painters, from Morton Feldman to Maguy Marin and Bruce Nauman. In Brazil, nowadays, one of the most interesting and active aspects of the contemporary reception of his works is connected with this feature. Adriano and Fernando Guimarães, known as 'Irmãos [Brothers] Guimarães', originally visual artists, migrated to the performance arts and the theatrical staging of his work, exploring sculpture and video art in theatrical productions and exhibitions based on Beckett, and training actors to specialise in Beckettian procedures (both of them teach in Brasília). They have performed worldwide, in Avignon, Los Angeles, Paris and London.

Nuno Ramos (1960) is another visual artist whose work rejects traditional supports and promotes the marriage between different languages and disparate elements, precarious materials, dealing with fragility, failure, silence and the impotence of art. He is also an

essayist, writing about contemporary painters and sculptors he admires, while simultaneously devoting himself to cultural matters significant in the Brazilian humanities or social facts that express synthetically the Brazilian way of living, such as football or popular music, and is a prize-winning writer. Alberto Tassinari, a critic, made it clear how his poetics and stylistic idiosyncrasies descend from two different unorthodox Brazilian traditions – that of Oswald de Andrade, Zé Celso, Nelson Rodrigues and Glauber Rocha, cultivating exaggeration and a certain dose of stylistic anarchy, and that of Mário de Andrade, Niemeyer, the Concrete Poetry and Bossa Nova, a more constructive and rationalist modernist current.

His fictional prose,<sup>5</sup> which refutes neat definition, has no precise subject, though historical and local experience are essentially included, and explores syntactical gaps and ambiguity by means of an undefined narrative support (similar to Beckett's 'last person' as opposed to the usual 'first or third persons'). Significance, reached only by minimal alterations in rhythm, sound and meaning, is in ruins; elusive images are relentlessly pursued, but come to be always deprived of easily recognisable references. Mixing lyrical, epic and dramatic elements, his writings have the effect of suspending subjectivity and language, no longer easily taken for granted by the reader, and advancing only by denials.

Beckett's reader, Nuno Ramos, shows himself at least of equal importance in his plastic productions, installations that depend on the multiplication of voices that refuse to communicate or keep silent and frequently quote Beckett. *Monologue to a Dead Dog*<sup>6</sup> and *Soap Opera*,<sup>7</sup> for example, dramatise the troublesome relations between mind and body, voice, memories and identity in a very Beckettian way, without neglecting local singularities, such as the relatively recent modernisation, the social inequality, the richness of folk and popular culture, the openness of possibilities. When 'nothing to be done' meets 'everything still to be done' – precisely the case when Brazil meets Beckett – what will result cannot be predicted for sure.

Beckett's Brazilian editions are an important part of this encounter and should also be reviewed, even if only by a *vol d'oiseau* account. Appealing from the very beginning to local actors and drama students, Beckett's plays were translated into Brazilian Portuguese quite early, as Alfredo Mesquita's and Carlos Kroeber's stagings in the late 1950s mentioned above may have already suggested. Their journey from stage to printing houses, though, proved quite difficult and, for a long time, local readers interested in Beckett's dramatic works were forced to make use of the translations provided from Portugal. As rhythm, lexical singularities and, above all, pronominal use split Brazilian and Portuguese versions considerably apart, a permanent 'mind the gap' was imposed upon the reader's attention.

*Esperando Godot* was the first play published for a large public in Brazil, as one might guess, in Flávio Rangel's translation, as part of a collection devoted to the popularisation of universal classics meant to be sold in newsagents shops (*Esperando Godot*, trans. Flávio Rangel, reviewed by Tânia Brandão and Moacyr Goes, São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1976). *Homme de théâtre* himself, Rangel was very sensitive to the aural resonances and meta-theatrical allusions in Beckett's play. Translating from the French, he provided a version very suited to stage demands, but out of print rather quickly and only to be found second-hand from the 1980s on. New editions of Beckett's drama didn't appear until very recently, with new translations of *Waiting for Godot* (2005, *Esperando Godot*), *Endgame* (2002, *Fim de partida*) and *Happy Days* (2010, *Dias felizes*).

It was not until Beckett's eightieth birthday that Beckett's fiction was translated into

Brazilian Portuguese, though only sporadically at first. Indeed, from the early novels and short stories, there are still no local editions, though a translation of *Murphy* is to be published in 2013. However, translations of the postwar trilogy – *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* (*Malone morre*) and *The Unnamable* (*O inominável*) – were released in the 1980s. Except for *Malone dies*, they were all re-translated in the last decade, as part of a new wave of Beckettian studies in Brazil, alongside versions of *Prémier amour* (*Primeiro amor*) and the French short stories, *La fin*, *L'expulsé* and *Le calmant* (*Novelas: O fim, O expulso, O calmante*).

As for the later Beckett, his brief narratives, *faux départs* and late longer fiction, translations of *How It Is* (*Como é*) anticipated the complexity of the so-called second trilogy. *Companhia e outros textos* (2012), an invaluable volume, gathered translations of *Company* (*Companhia*), *Worstward Ho* (*Pra frente o pior*) and other Beckettian prose experiments with his 'last narrative person'. To match this book, another curiously puts together translations of *Mal vu mal dit* and *Le dépeupleur* (*Mal visto mal dito, O despovoador*, 2006). Some of Beckett's literary essays were also published in Brazil, such as *Proust* and 'Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce'. Considered as a whole, editorial movement around his work is gradually becoming more comprehensive and substantial.

The growing interest in Beckett in recent years has been followed by the publication of many scholarly studies on his *oeuvre*. From panoramic presentations, such as that provided by Celia Berretini (2004), *Samuel Beckett: escritor plural*, to books focused on specific aspects as diverse as his postwar prose, bilingualism, televisual poetics or peculiar use of stage directions.

Beckett's work is far beyond a timeless 'voice of species' and its manifold reception all over the world, deeply modulated by peculiar historical circumstances, may show itself as challenging as his original formal strategies are. Other surprising Becketts emerge when his plays are staged (and his novels read) in peripheral cultural contexts, such as in Brazil, renewing in unexpected ways the human, aesthetic and linguistic impasses which they are made of.

## Notes

1. R. Correa (2007) 'Finding Godot: Samuel Beckett, Fifty Years in the Brazilian Theatre', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 15: 124–44, and (2005) 'A recepção crítica de Esperando Godot no teatro brasileiro', *Revista Gestos* (Irvine, California), 40: 113–32.
2. Writing to Jerome Lindon (19 November 1955), Beckett suggests he would like him to authorise a Brazilian production of *Waiting for Godot*. Alfredo Mesquita had consulted him on the possibility of directing the play in Brazil that very month. As a matter of fact, dealing with the complicated issue of the copyrights, the playwright himself asked Mesquita if he could not make use of a Spanish translation, *Esperando a Godot*, by Pablo Palant, already published, instead of the Portuguese one by Luis de Lima. See G. Craig, M. Fehsenfeld, D. Gunn and L. Overbeck (eds) (2011) *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume II, 1941–1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 542–4.
3. Gilda de Mello e Souza's article – 'Pascal e Samuel Beckett' (1956) *Sequência: cinema e teatro* (São Paulo) 1.1: 41–2 – may well illustrate that. She was a Professor of Aesthetics at USP, married to Antonio Candido, Brazil's most important literary critic and historian of the twentieth century. It should be noted that in Belo Horizonte, a planned city that anticipated the modernist calling of Brasília in many aspects, the local Cassino da Pampulha (inaug. 1943), part of an architectonic complex conceived by Oscar Niemeyer surrounding an enormous

artificial lake, reopened, after gambling was declared illegal, as a Modern Art Museum, with a semi-amateur production of *Fim de jogo* (*Endgame*), directed by Carlos Kroeber, in the very year of the world première in 1957.

4. See J. Kalb (1989) 'The Gamble of Staging Prose Fiction', in *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.125ff.
5. N. Ramos (2001) *O pão do corvo* [*The Raven's Bread*] (São Paulo: 34 Letras); (2008) *Ó* (São Paulo: Iluminuras); (2010) *O mau vidraceiro* [*The Bad Glazier*] (São Paulo: Iluminuras).
6. 'Ten marble slabs (61 × 102.2 × 2 inches each) are arranged in two rows set 7.9 inches apart; the words of a monologue were sculpted in the internal face of one row of slabs (impossible to be read, even if intermittently lit by bulb lamps); on the external face of one of the slabs, a screen monitor shows footage in which the driver pulls his car over onto the shoulder of the Raposo Tavares highway, in Sao Paulo, gets out of the car, and goes to the guard rail, where a dead dog lies. He then places a small marble pedestal on the ground and, on top of it, a boom box with its loud speakers, facing the dead animal. He turns on the device, goes back to the car and drives away. While cars go past, the loudspeakers deliver the text "Monólogo para um cachorro morto" (Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Brasília, 2008).' See R. Sardenberg (ed.) (2010), *Nuno Ramos* (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Cobogó), p. 563.
7. 'Two walls of soap and marble, forming acoustic shells with built-in loudspeakers that deliver the piece *Soap Opera*, written by Nuno Ramos. Performed by two lyrical singers (a baritone and a soprano) who emit howling and barking sounds, the piece includes parts from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute*, and fragments from poems by Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Konstantínos Kaváfis (Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Brasília, 2008).' See Sardenberg, *Nuno Ramos*, p. 564.

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