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Staging Death in a Few Plays by Beckett and Pinter

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Beckett and Pinter, two dominant voices in postmodern British literature, attempt to stage death, which seems to defy any idea of representation. Aware of the limitations of words in expressing reality, both playwrights use visual art, in particular the symbolism of darkness, to convey the tragic dimension of death. In Beckett's work, death is also signified by the dislocation of the human body, reduced to a simple mouth lost in the darkness or human heads emerging from grey funerary urns, among other things. In Pinter's plays, death is more metaphysical. It signifies the loss of the illuminated private space created in the threatening dark nothingness of the universe. Beckett's characters wish to enter the state of non-being, the silent, obscure realm of death, in order to free themselves from the pain of being, while Pinter's characters systematically avoid the dark forces that come out of nowhere and can expel them from their safe space of identity. However, the characters' desires cannot be fulfilled. Beckett's human pieces are visited by 'the angel of life' in the form of a trace of light that reduces them to a visibly endless torment. Pinter's refugees end up being invaded and swallowed up by the darkness of nothingness, and cease to be. The ghastly image of death presented by Beckett and Pinter, though contradictory, reveals man's powerlessness and the tragic nature of existence in a world bereft of all its old certainties.

Keywords: Beckett, Pinter, death, light, darkness, nothingness

Résumé

Cet article examine comment Beckett et Pinter, deux voix dominantes de la littérature britannique postmoderne, tentent de mettre sur scène la mort qui semble défier toute idée de représentation. Conscients de la limite des mots pour dire le réel, les deux dramaturges font recours à l'art visuel, notamment la symbolique de l'obscurité, pour faire voir la mort dans sa dimension tragique. Chez Beckett, la mort est également signifiée par la dislocation du corps humain, réduit à une simple bouche

perdue dans l'obscurité ou des têtes humaines émergeant d'urnes funéraires grises, entre autres. Chez Pinter, la mort est plutôt d'ordre métaphysique. Elle signifie la perte de l'espace privé éclairé aménagé dans le grand néant obscur de l'univers qui se fait menaçant. Les êtres de Beckett souhaitent accéder à l'état de non-être, au royaume silencieux et obscur de la mort pour se libérer de la souffrance d'être, tandis que les personnages de Pinter évitent systématiquement les forces obscures sortis de nulle part et qui peuvent les expulser de leur espace identitaire et sécuritaire. C'est cependant un constat d'échec auxquels aboutissent les personnages des deux œuvres. Les lambeaux humains de Beckett sont visités par « l'ange de la vie » sous la forme d'une trace de lumière qui les réduit à une tourmente visiblement sans fin. Les réfugiés de Pinter finissent par être envahis et engloutis par l'obscurité du néant et cessent d'être. L'image affreuse de la mort que présentent Beckett et Pinter, quoique contradictoire, est révélatrice de l'impuissance de l'homme et la nature tragique de l'existence dans un monde endeuillé de toutes ses vieilles certitudes.

Mots-clés : Beckett, Pinter, mort, lumière, obscurité, néant

Introduction

The English Harold Pinter (1930-2008) and the Irish Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) are two illustrative figures of postmodern British literature. They write against a backdrop not only of the exhaustion of meaning, but also of the crisis of representation. This crisis arises from the inability of art to express reality, or from the divorce between the reality represented by art and the essential reality that characterises human life in a universe stripped of its old certainties and plunged into nonsense, the inexplicable and the absurd. It is this crisis of representation that is at the root of one of the most rebellious dramatic movements, the 'theatre of the absurd'. Alongside the Romanian-French Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994), Beckett is the most remarkable figure of this theatre, which shakes up and rejects the traditional literary canons and with which Pinter is, rightly or wrongly, associated.

Whether Pinter belongs to this avant-garde dramatic trend is debatable. What is certain, however, is that his drama is intimately linked to that of Beckett, of whom he is one of the greatest admirers. Although at first glance they appear to be opposites, the dramatic worlds of the two writers can be compared from a number of angles. Generally speaking, they can be seen as two attempts to express and name the unspeakable. In this article, we look specifically at the way in which the two playwrights attempt to put on stage the complex reality of death which, although omnipresent in literature since the dawn of time, seems to refuse to allow itself to be named or represented. As post-structuralist and post-modern thinkers in general have attempted to demonstrate, the evocative power of words has reached its limits. Therefore, Beckett and Pinter resort to visual language in an attempt to convey the experience of finitude. In addition to their fairly innovative ways of representing death, both playwrights lend a tragic aspect to the theme of death that this article will also attempt to underscore.

1. Two forms of death

To speak of death in Beckett's and Pinter's plays is to evoke a reality that is both absent and present. Death as a total absence of life materialized by a corpse is present in the discourse of the characters, especially Beckett's, but it is actually non-existent on stage. Yet, the characters in both works seem to be dying differently. In Pinter's plays, dying has a metaphysical dimension. It means losing the space of refuge which shelters the character from the incomprehensible world outside that guarantees him an identity. "Outside here is death." This warning from Hamm to Clov in Beckett's *Endgame* takes on its full meaning in Pinter's dramatic universe. The room or house represents life, and the empty space outside symbolizes death. From this perspective, death seems to be inevitable. Those who put so much effort into protecting themselves against intruders from the outside world end up losing the fight. Rose in *The Room*, Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, and Edward in *A Slight Ache*, have all lost control of

their security world and their identity. They have therefore experienced a form of death.

It is a completely different facet of death that is presented to us in Beckett's plays. This is roughly what is traditionally known, that is to say biological death, the complete cessation of life which materializes through an inert body lying on the ground. In truth, the humans (the term is not really appropriate) who appear in the dramaticules, more precisely in *Not I* and in *Play*, are not far from being corpses. In the first play, the character is reduced to a mouth and suspended a few meters from the ground. The second one displays three heads emerging from three urns serving as tombs. "There is every suggestion that they are dead and in a limbo where they are required to recount the events that brought them to the gray pitiless world in which the audience finds them" (Morrison 83). Are they really dead in the literal sense of the term? There is nothing to confirm this, because words come out of their mouths. The words do not, however, constitute sufficient proof that these parts of human body are entirely alive. The truth is that they are neither alive nor dead. Or again, and this is the idea that seems more plausible to us, they have passed from life to a form of death which is the re-actualization of life.

Like Molloy in Beckett's eponymous novel who ironically claims to be born into death, these body parts have not had time to benefit from the peaceful rest of death that life shakes them again to make them relive the torture of being. In *Not I* and in *Play*, we seem to be in a post-apocalyptic world. Instead of death-disappearance, synonymous with total absence of suffering, these wretched people experience another punishment in their state of death. While the dead bodies of Beckett are visited by the "angel of life", the private space of Pinter's characters is suddenly invaded by the "angel of death". Though meaning two different things in the two dramatic worlds, life and death are respectively expressed through the images of light and darkness.

2. Expressing death through visual art

One of the challenges faced by modern and postmodern writers is to attempt to represent the unrepresentable, to speak the unspeakable or to name the unnameable. Death is precisely one of these realities that seem to escape all possibility of representation. Beckett and Pinter try to give shape to it through images or a visual language. Besides, in one of his rare interviews, Beckett admits to preferring images to words, because the latter is more precise. He explains it in these terms:

Thus the image of a knife is more accurate than the word knife

... "knife" has no meaning, it is a blurred image. You have to say "butcher's knife", "kitchen knife", "a knife to cut the bread" so that the word takes some meaning. But when it is shown, you see at once what kind of knife it is: the image is then stronger than the word. (Qtd by Kim 38)

Like the word "knife", death remains vague and elusive until it is shown concretely. It escapes the power of words. It is unspeakable. It is then necessary to free it from words and give it a rather concrete form through images. Besides, after all we are in the theatre which is in essence a visual art. The images that unfold in Beckett's last plays communicate what Kedzierski (51) calls the essential reality which is that of death:

In his later works, Beckett constructs a world of his own from which reality (essentially reality) can be extracted. The medium he uses is a cumulative image, announcing a given message in a specific literary code to which we can become familiar through repeated (not necessarily systematic) contact with many of Beckett's worksⁱ. (my translation)

ⁱ Dans ses œuvres tardives, Beckett construit un monde en soi *duquel* on peut extraire la réalité (la réalité essentiellement). Le moyen dont il se sert est une image cumulative, annonçant un message donné dans

Two images seem to predominate in Beckett's very last plays. The image of fragmented bodies and that of darkness. In *Not I* and in *Play* in particular, the playing area is almost entirely shrouded in darkness. In the first play, only the mouth is lit, the rest of the playing space is in the dark: "*Stage in but darkness for MOUTH, upstage audience right, about feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow. Invisible microphone*" (376). In the second, it is only a beam of light which successively and intermittently illuminates the three faces stuck in the urns lost in an indistinct place: "*The curtains rises on a stage in almost complete darkness. urns just discernible. five seconds*" (307). As H el ene Lecassois (262) points out, "life is only present in the form of a trace". Assimilating life to a simple trace of light is also admitting that the entire rest of the scene which is in darkness is symptomatic of the non-living, of death.

As in Beckett's plays, light and darkness symbolize life and death respectively in Pinter's plays. From this point of view, however, two major differences emerge. The first is that Beckett's dissected beings are plunged into complete darkness before being illuminated by a trace of light, while Pinter's characters are still in a fully or partially lit space and are threatened by the darkness which has finished invading all around their living spaces. The second difference is that Beckett's characters prefer darkness to light, whereas Pinter's ones systematically avoid any trace of darkness in favour of the light of their closed world. Ironically, however, Beckett's creatures, in their death condition, are subjected to the light of life, synonymous with suffering, while Pinter's creatures, who want to live, are condemned to die. To understand this reality is to grasp the meaning of the game of light in Beckett's last plays and the fear that Pinter's characters experience in the face of the darkness which always ends up invading them.

3. Longing for darkness! Longing for light!

If it is true that light and darkness have the same symbolic charge in the plays of Beckett and Pinter, the fact remains that they are appreciated very differently by the characters in the two works. Beckett's characters perceive death as the "deliverance from a life entirely devoted to physical and metaphysical evil" (Colin 8)ⁱⁱ. They find salvation in darkness. As for those of Pinter, they find in the darkness the axis of evil, the danger that must be avoided at all costs. They want to live in the light. Darkness is synonymous with desired death (liberation) in Beckett's characters and unwanted death (damnation) in Pinter's protagonists.

"To be", for Beckett's characters, is "to be perceived". It is also to suffer given that life is unbearable. Wessler (13) demonstrates how being seen or heard inevitably leads to suffering:

Suffering is only activated if I am heard, seen and recognised, by an eye, a spirit; in other words, by a fellow human being. Thus, it's my belonging to humanity that's problematic. Belonging or recognition, in every sense of the word: if something (eyes, ears) confers on me the status of human, then my suffering is triggered. There is undoubtedly a nostalgia for animality, for sleep, in the characters, which is also a nostalgia for early childhood, the 'life before', before self-awarenessⁱⁱⁱ. (my translation)

Therefore, "not to be", which means not to suffer, is only possible if one can no longer be perceived.

un code litt eraire sp ecifique auquel nous pouvons nous initier par un contact r ep et e (pas forc ement syst ematique) avec des nombreuses  uvres de Beckett.

ⁱⁱ « d elivrance d'une vie tout enti ere vou ee au mal physique et m etaphysique »

ⁱⁱⁱ La souffrance ne s'active que si je suis entendu, vu et reconnu, par un  eil, un esprit ; autrement dit, par un semblable. C'est donc mon appartenance   l'humanit e qui est probl ematique. Appartenance ou reconnaissance, dans tous les sens du terme : si quelque chose (regard, oreille) me conf ere le statut d'humain alors ma souffrance se d eclenche. Il existe sans doute une nostalgie de l'animalit e, du sommeil, chez les personnages, qui est aussi une nostalgie de la toute petite enfance, la « vie d'avant », avant la conscience de soi.

The condition of non-being or non-perception is at the heart of *Film*, a cinematic work by Beckett. In this silent film introduced by the famous Berkeley formula, *Esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived), the only character it foregrounds seeks to extract himself from sight in order to no longer be. However, his attempt is unsuccessful. In fact, even if he manages to shield himself from all outside eyes, there remains one gaze from which he cannot escape: it is his own.

Self-perception being the only thing that prevents the character from accessing the precious zone of non-being, the human shreds projected on stage in *Not I* and in *Play* are not far from taking this ultimate step of non-being. They can no longer perceive themselves. However, being on stage, they are inevitably subject to the gaze of the other, of the spectator. The only chance left for them to no longer be perceived remains darkness. It makes them imperceptible, introduces them into "universal anonymity", suppresses their identity and therefore puts an end to the suffering of being. Darkness is thus the symbol of deliverance, of final liberation, as Gruber explains in these terms:

Beckett's esteem for glittering essences of light and color is not wholly reconcilable – neither aesthetically nor philosophically – with his fondness for dimness, shadows, and the dark. Darkness in Beckett is not merely a region where light does not extend, but a distinct zone with its own separate characteristics. Darkness provides relief; it consoles, it soothes, it heals. It seems to be a kind of sanctuary, whereas where there is light, there is often suffering, torture, even terror. A common experience of Beckett's characters is to suffer from exposure to intense beams of light. Beckett's characters dwell in realms where light is more often than not a source of annoyance, where darkness and shadow alone provide relief, and where visual information is *ipso facto* unbearable or unreliable". (Qted by Kim 70-71)

Gruber doesn't just talk about how darkness provides a sense of relief for Beckett's characters. He also emphasizes that they are not entirely safe from pain since light can burst out at any moment and shine on them. As a result, it draws them out of their blissful rest and exposes them again to sight and therefore to the suffering of being. Because it makes these dying creatures suffer by exposing them to public view, the light has become, for them, what the unknown universe was for Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. It is the essential source of their unhappiness from which they have no possibility of freeing themselves. "If there were only darkness," said Beckett, "everything would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness, but also clarity that our situation becomes inexplicable"^{iv} (my translation) (Qted by Beaujeu 278). These words give a better insight into the harsh existential situation of his characters torn between darkness and light, death and life. If they could disappear into the darkness for good, they would have definitively freed themselves from the pain of being. But the light is there to highlight them and keep them in suffering.

It is this light, which the talking mouth and the three heads emerging from the urns no longer want, that Pinter's characters are tirelessly seeking. Light is indispensable to them. It is the foundation of their identity, of their lives, which they have no desire to lose. For these beings, to exist is above all to be able to understand, to submit what exists to the light of their reason. And it is only in their little worlds that they can give free rein to their reason. Consequently, it is no coincidence that their private worlds are illuminated. Light is both the metaphor and the guarantee of knowledge, power and therefore identity. Everything that is illuminated is understood. It also means that everything outside this private zone is inevitably in the dark, and thus beyond the characters' comprehension. This accounts for characters' attitude of distrust towards darkness and everything that is outside their illuminated zone. Unfortunately, just as the Beckettian dead cannot escape the disturbing light of life, so Pinter's characters are unable to escape darkness, death, or the end of their identity. They are fatally

^{iv} « S'il n'y avait que l'obscurité, dit Beckett, tout serait clair. C'est parce qu'il y a non seulement l'obscurité, mais aussi la clarté que notre situation devient inexplicable »

blinded by the darkness in their place of refuge.

4. Being dead and dying: The dead trapped in the light of life and the living invaded by the darkness of death

In the two plays by Beckett through which we have chosen to illustrate the theme of death, it is not possible to see how the characters portrayed there have arrived at this death which is also a new form of life. They are suddenly presented to us in their state of death. In Pinter's plays, on the other hand, the spectator witnesses the gradual death of characters such as that of Rose in *The Room*, Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, Davies in *The Caretaker* and Edward in *A Slight Ache*. The mouth in Beckett's *Not I* and the three heads in his *Play* reveal what it means to be dead; the aforementioned Pinter's characters give a fairly idea of what dying means.

What essentially links Beckettian beings in their condition of death and Pinter's protagonists in the process of dying is undoubtedly suffering and helplessness. Death marks the beginning of another tragic form of existence for Beckett's damned. In the same way, dying for Pinter's characters is to experience the painful experience of gradual decline, of expulsion from the space of life.

Having already been caught in the death trap, the mouth in *Not I* and the three heads in *Play* are unable to act. In the dark universe in which they are kept, a new being has established itself as king and dictates its law to them: it is the light. The restrictive nature of the light does not only lie in the fact that it exposes them to sight and therefore to life and suffering. The light is also unpleasant in that it forces them to speak.

The mouth is incapable of remaining silent simply because it obeys the will of the light which does not leave it the possibility of melting into the paradisiacal silence of darkness. As long as it is enlightened, it will not stop speaking. Light generates words and darkness provides silence. The beam of light is at the origin of the words uttered by the three faces on stage. Each of these three characters only speaks if he is under the spotlight and is silent as soon as it turns away from him and plunges him into restful darkness. The mechanical stimulus determines the tone of their voices through the variation in the intensity of the light that it sometimes diffuses simultaneously and sometimes successively on them. When the light is dim, the voices are almost inaudible: "faint spots simultaneously on three faces. Three seconds. Voices faint, largely unintelligible" (305). It is enough for the light to increase in brightness so that the voices become audible again: "strong spots simultaneously on three faces, three seconds. Voices normal strength" (308).

The light ray is a real executioner for these unfortunate creatures whom it subjects to its whims and systematically denies any possibility of rest and salvation. In his explanatory notes for the staging of the play, Beckett himself specifies that the three heads are victims of the light beam: "The source of light is simple and must not be situated outside the ideal space (stage) occupied by its victim" (312). To know that speech is the auditory sign of the existence of Beckettian man, just as light is the visual sign, is to better understand the pain of these three human faces that the spotlight causes them. The word has become an unbearable evil. Even if silence does not automatically lead to salutary death, words remain the most eloquent proof of life and suffering. From there, we understand better why Beckett considers the three puppets to be victims of the light.

How long will the trio in *Play* continue to suffer? For eternity, we are tempted to say. There is no indication that the inquisitive beam of light will ever turn away from its victims to let them enjoy the calm of darkness. At least that is what appears in the structure of the play and in the way the curtain has fallen. In fact, the stage directions specify that the play must be repeated twice. The way the second sequence of the play ends indicates that things will start again and continue indefinitely. Beckett's later comments about the beam of light only confirm the idea that there is no end in sight to the logorrhea from which these dead people suffer:

The investigator [the light] gradually emerges and appears to be the victim of her investigations in the same way as the others; she too feels the need to find her freedom in her narrow space: this is how she literally becomes an actor by varying, however slightly, her speed and intensity.
 v (my translation) (Qted by Gontarski 90)

According to Beckett, this real torturer that is the light is not free in its movements. The existential situation of its victims is more tragic than ever. Their salvation is not directly the responsibility of the light beam which seems to be subject to a force external to it. To be dead is to experience the most absolute helplessness and eternal suffering. The intrusion of light into the dark realm of death gives death a character that is both alive and tragic. Hamm in *Endgame* may well whistle the end of recess and decree definitive silence in the hope of melting all identity and all life into the void of the universe. However, in this so dark and calm nothingness is hidden a ray of light which, as soon as man bursts in, attacks him, takes him out of his liberating muteness.

In short, to fit into Christian theological logic, let us say that the derelict bodies in *Not I* and in *Play* are comparable to the souls of sinners subjected to the torture of hell. The sentence they serve consists in talking endlessly, living forever. It is still ironic that language, which was one of the fundamental recourses of Beckett's characters to face the adversity of the physical universe, becomes the whip by which they are tortured in the universe of death.

The transition from life to death that Pinter's characters make is nonetheless a suffering and an expression of human helplessness in the face of the forces of nature. The post-mortem suffering of Beckett's creatures is due to the sole presence of light in their dark mortuary universe, while the death which invites itself into the illuminated space of Pinter's characters is embodied by darkness. In short, darkness is to Pinter's living what light is to Beckett's dead. Not only is darkness a sign of damnation, but it pursues Pinter's miserable creatures to the depths of their refuge, just as light mistreats Beckett's poor guys to their final resting places. Darkness is, for Pinter's characters, similar to a lethal injection. The characters inevitably lose their identity (their enclosed space, their life) at the first contact with the forces of darkness. The threatening natural darkness is, however, only the harbinger of the imminent arrival of the dark man who forces his entry into the family's monitored space and throws the life of one of its occupants into the darkness of nothingness.

In *The Room*, Rose constantly emphasizes the darkness outside, in contrast to the light in her room. At first glance, we are tempted to attribute her repetitive remarks to a solitary woman whose life is reduced to innocuous words and gestures. However, a closer examination of his words reveals that they reflect a well-founded concern. Indeed, if we know that the clarity in which Rose lives in her small space is the metaphor and the guarantee of her knowledge, her only reason for being, we draw the conclusion that the darkness outside symbolizes the unknown, the uncontrollable or death. We therefore measure all of her panic when she learns, through the couple Mr. and Mrs. Sands, the only existing trace of light is in her room.

Rose. What's it like out?

Mrs Sands. It's very dark out.

Mr Sand. No darker than in.

Mrs Sands. He's right there.

Mr Sands. It is darker in than out, for my money.

v L'investigatrice [la lumière] émerge peu à peu et apparaît victime de ses investigations au même titre que les autres, elle éprouve elle aussi le besoin de trouver sa liberté dans son étroit espace : c'est ainsi qu'elle devient littéralement actrice en faisant varier, même faiblement, sa vitesse et son intensité.

Mrs Sands. There's not much light in this place, is there, Mrs Hudd? Do you know, this is the first bit of light we've seen since we came in?(113)

Beside the outside world, the entire apartment in which Rose's bedroom is located is plunged into darkness. There is a much darker place in the house: it is the basement bedroom that haunts Rose. "Couldn't see a thing" [...] "There wasn't any light" (115.), say Mr. and Mrs. Sands respectively in response to Rose who asks them what the atmosphere is like in the basement.

It is very significant that the dark man who invades Rose in her space of refuge emerges from this dark part of the house. This man, an old blind black man who gives his identity as Riley, is, through his mysterious appearance, the complete personification of the enigmatic place from which he has come. He is the living symbol of death. We then understand Rose's categorical refusal to welcome this strange character who says he wants to meet her. His entry into Rose's living space is synonymous with her straight death. Can Rose escape her death? The answer is no. Under the insistence of Mr. Kidd, who has come, on behalf of the old man, to ask her to receive the latter, she gives in: "Fetch him. Quick. Quick" (122). That she allows Mr Kidd to bring the man to her only reflects her helplessness in the face of death. She seems to obey an irresistible force that we could call destiny. Her first gesture when faced with the unknown is to reject him with all her strength: "Don't thank me for anything. I don't want you up here. I don't know who you are. And the sooner you get out the better" (122). In her severe indictment against the old intruder, Rose describes him in terms very evocative of death: "You're all deaf and dumb and blind, the lot of you. A bunch of cripples" (123). The man embodies death doubly, first by his dark, mysterious character, but also by these physical traits: he is old, blind and deaf. In short, as Rose's words imply, he is a walking dead man. What does this guy want from Rose? He gives us the answer: "Come home now, Sal" (123). The purpose of his unwanted visit is declined. He wants to bring Rose home, to her father, from where she seems to have escaped to take refuge in this small bright space.

It matters little to us to know, at this level, if the old man really is the messenger of Rose's father, as he maintains. On the other hand, what could not be otherwise is that the man wants to take Rose from the calm of her living space to bring her to a place unknown to the spectator. However, for this lady, there is no life or identity outside this enclosed space. Suffice it to say that the old man is a messenger of death, of the nothingness of the external universe from which Rose comes. The paternal house to which Riley alludes can thus symbolically be understood as the vast world outside.

This is the place to remember that the enclosed space is only an artificial refuge, a tent that the characters have pitched in the vast nothingness of the universe in which they find themselves without knowing why. Coming from this vast black world in contact with which they simply cease to be, they cannot resist the forces of things when they want to bring them back to their father's house. This is reflected in Rose's helplessness before the man, a helplessness which leads her to suddenly lose her sight. She cries out as the curtain falls: "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see" (126). This unexpected blindness of Rose has been the subject of various comments. We believe, however, that it expresses the completion of Rose's definitive loss of identity or her death. Losing sight literally means losing control of things, especially internal space; it means to be deprived of one's capacity to understand.

To stop seeing is to live in darkness in the literal and symbolic sense of the term; it therefore means to no longer be. According to Anne Messenger, "the idea of sight and blindness, along with light and darkness, are traditional metaphors for knowledge and ignorance that Pinter uses, again traditionally, to image forth the problem of identity" (Qtd by Kim 200). In this beautiful formula, Messenger establishes the link between sight, light and knowledge on the one hand and that between blindness, darkness and ignorance in Pinter's plays on the other. Sight implies light and knowledge. In this way, it symbolizes identity. Blindness refers to darkness and ignorance. It is thus a sign of loss of identity. It is no coincidence then that the dismissal of the character from his place of refuge is very

often preceded by the darkening of his environment and his eyes. Rose is not the only one who illustrates this reality. Edward's fate in *A Slight Ache* is, in many ways, reminiscent of Rose's.

"The angel of death", who has come to visit Edward, shares almost the same characteristics with the one who has come to extract Rose from her space of security and identity. He is a blind and deaf-mute old man. Nonetheless, unlike the old man in *The Room* of whom we at least know the name and the reason for his presence at Rose's house, the old man in *A Slight Ache* is remarkable for the mystery that surrounds him. We do not know his name or the reason for his presence in front of the apartment of the couple, Edward and Flora. Since he holds boxes of matches in his hands, the couple decides to call him "the matcheseller." Even if Edward persists in seeing him as an impostor unlike Flora who believes that he is a poor innocent, everything indicates that he is a messenger of death. This is Morrison's reading: "The characteristics of the matcheseller also are suggestive of death. At first so old he appears to have lost both sight and hearing, he is himself an image of approaching death" (158). If the "angel of death" in *The Room* comes out of the darkness of the underground part of the apartment where Rose and Bert live, the one who appears in front of Edward and Flora's apartment seems to have suddenly returned dark the space family of the couple and particularly Edward's eyes. This is what emerges from this interview between Edward and Flora which immediately follows the frightening observation of the presence of the unknown:

Flora: Your eyes are bloodshot.

Edward: Damn it.

Flora: It's too dark in here to peer.

Edward: Damn.

Flora: It's so bright outside. (*A SA*, p.178)

It is surprising that, for every reaction to her husband's panic in front of the mysterious character, Flora emphasizes the pain in his eyes and the darkness that quickly invades their home. She seems to make the correlation between these facts and the presence of the unknown being. The link between Edward's eyesight problem and the presence of the old man becomes more obvious when, a little later, Edward, still under the influence of panic, exclaims: "Aaaah my eyes" (178). Edward's "little pain" in his eyes - which also recalls Rose's blindness following her confrontation with Riley - is a warning sign of the very imminent loss of his identity.

As Flora suggests, the forces of darkness have suddenly entered the family space ("It's too dark in here"), while the exterior space is suddenly illuminated ("It's so bright outside"). In other words, death which has invited itself into the private universe is opposed by life noted outside. If, as the clues already mentioned show, we assume that Edward is the one grappling with death within the inner space, Flora is certainly the only one who sees a trace of life outside. This life is all the more incomprehensible because in external space, which usually symbolizes death, there stands a man whose all characteristics are reminiscent of demise.

We must understand the outcome of the situation to understand the full scope of Flora's vision. Indeed, Edward sees himself evicted from his home to make way for the old man. The one who was alive, Edward, is now dead and the one who was dead, the old man, is now alive. Even though the old man represents death in the eyes of the viewer and Edward, he is life for Flora. From now on, it is towards him that all her attention is turned, especially when we know that her companion is already struggling with death. This is the meaning of the unusual contrast between the darkness in the apartment and the light outside.

Helpless, Edward unconsciously accompanies the process of his death, as predicted by Flora in veiled terms. Like Rose who authorizes Mr. Kidd to bring the black blind man to him, he orders his

wife to bring in the strange man. "Tell him to come in" (181). This one inspires disgust in him: "I smelt him when he came under my window. Can't you smell the house now" (181), she says to Flora, echoing Rose's words addressed to Riley as soon as she faces him: "Oh, the customers. They come in here and stink the place out. After a handout. I know all about it" (123). The lexical field of stench which appears in the words of Rose and Edward with which they welcome these dark men, expresses the repulsive nature of the death which they carry. They reject death, but cannot escape it.

No one knows as much as Flora that Edward is dying. She is the privileged witness to the fall of her husband. It is often through comments apparently out of step with the nightmare that her husband experiences in the presence of the unknown, that she paradoxically draws his attention and that of the viewer to his gradual decline. The first face-to-face between the two men during which Edward tries in vain to make the man speak and unravel his mystery provides further proof. While Edward has come out of this confrontation literally stunned, even asking, due to lack of physical strength, for Flora's help to get away from the man ("with great weariness]: Take me into the garden" (188), the latter involves him in a discussion which, probably, has nothing to do with the ordeal he is experiencing at the moment

Flora. Look at the trees.

Edward. Yes.

Flora. Our own trees. Can you hear the birds?

Edward. No I can't hear them.

Flora. But they're singing, high up, and flapping.

Edward. Good. Let them flap. (188)

To understand how meaningful Flora's questions are, let us see how they highlight two sense organs, sight and hearing, in Edward, which can serve as a barometer to measure the dissemination of the seeds of death in him. Indeed, if Edward can no longer see the tree, if he can no longer hear the birds chirping, it means that he has become blind and deaf. In other words, he is about to be like the miserable old man, a dead man.

There is therefore a sort of transfer of characteristics between Edward and the man which takes place mysteriously during their tête-à-tête. The more Edward tries to demystify the old man, the more he resembles him. Edward has an intuition of his rapprochement with the unknown when he declares about the latter: "I should be the same, perhaps, in his place. Though, of course, I could not possibly find myself in his place" (188). Edward's awareness of the imperceptible border that now separates him from this "angel of death" suddenly opposes his will to live; hence the contradictory nature of his confessions. In Morrison's opinion, Edward knows he is dealing with death, but refuses to believe it:

The whole point of this play [*A Slight Ache*] is to demonstrate the hidden fear, the suppressed realization which keeps an ordinary person whistling in the dark, pretending all is well, refusing to acknowledge the fact that loss, death, extinction stand just outside his gate: that no place, however furnished, is safe. (157)

What makes Edward's awareness of his rapprochement with the old man tragic is above all his realization that the chap is the incarnation of death. This is how he describes him to his wife: "He's like jelly. A great bullockfat of jelly. He can't see straight. I think as a matter of fact he wears a glass eye. He's almost stone deaf... almost... not quite. He's nearly dead on his feet" (189). To resemble this "almost dead" man is to recognize that we ourselves are at the threshold of death. Although Edward closes his eyes to the reality that his death is very close, he can no longer see what differentiates him from the man he considers to be "almost dead". These confessions in this sense are pathetic: "My old acquaintance. My nearest and dearest. My kith and kin" (192). Like the listener and reader in *Ohio*,

Impromptu by Beckett, the old man has become Edward's double whose eyesight continues to worsen: "I've caught a cold. To germinate. In my eyes. It was this morning. In my eyes. My eyes", (198). Edward recognizes that he is losing his sight, that he has entered a phase of irreversible decline to definitively join the intruder in his existential situation. Only, it is at the moment when he thinks he is one with the old man that the latter changes strangely in his eyes. For him, the man has become incredibly younger: "You look younger. You look extraordinarily... youthful" (199). These words seem to be symptomatic of a state of delirium. Yet, this is not the case. The old man is indeed changing, not physically, but socially or, should we say, metaphysically. From the state of death in which he is presented to us, he has passed to life. He has regained his youth thanks to the help of Flora who incredibly decides to live with him in the house. To do this, she kicks her husband out of the marital home. The "dying" Edward is therefore replaced by the old man who is now life and light. This is what her eyes betray, which, for Flora, seem to have miraculously opened: "Your eyes, your eyes, your great big eyes" (192). The unknown regains sight, gains an enclosed space and identity, while Edward definitively loses all of this by being plunged forever into the dark nothingness. According to Katherine H. Burkman, the play can be interpreted as the death of an old king and the coronation of his more virile replacement.

Unlike Rose's death, Edward's is gradual and more painful. His expulsion from his space of security and identity is reminiscent of Stanley's in *The Birthday Party*. Like Edward, Stanley is progressively drained of all his physical and psychological strength before being extracted from his place of refuge. The "two angels of death", Goldberg and Mccann, who has come to put an end to Stanley's ease, however, reveal themselves to be very less passive than the one who has visited Edward. It is like true criminals that they have implemented the carefully orchestrated plan to liquidate their victim.

It is in a festive atmosphere, Stanley's birthday, created by the ingenious Goldberg for the circumstances, that the scene of the death of Stanley paradoxically takes place. As Jungsoo demonstrates, in detail, in an insightful analysis, the loss of identity that Stanley suffers at this moment cannot be sufficiently understood by the words and gestures of the characters, but is revealed entirely through the play of light: "The light indicates the strength of Stanley and his mental grasp on his identity. And when the light becomes fainter until there is no light at all, it is at this point that Stanley completely loses himself" (166-167). The definitive loss of Stanley's identity is above all suggested by the darkness which has suddenly darkened the room in which takes place on the famous birthday, before materializing in the final gesture of the two men: they bring him with them in their bus to an unknown place which they name Monty. This Monty is equivalent to the house to which old Riley wants to bring Rose. It is also this non-place, this outside into which Flora throw Edward. In short, it is par excellence the unlimited and obscure space of death as opposed to the closed and enlightened space of life from which they are all inevitably drawn.

Conclusion

This article looks at how Beckett and Pinter attempt to give substance to the complex reality of death. In a comparative approach, we show that both playwrights use visual language, in particular the image of darkness, to dramatise death. However, given their very different existential situations, Beckett's and Pinter's characters have opposite conceptions of death.

The human shreds staged in Beckett's last plays are in a post-apocalyptic situation, as indicated by their infinite physical shrinkage and the darkness that envelops them. Torn between death and life, they want to reach a state of total non-being, of definitive death, to free themselves from the suffering of existence. This much-desired state of non-being is only possible if these human remains disappear totally and definitively into the darkness, which is the only way of protecting them from self-perception and the gaze of the other, the viewer. Unfortunately, they are denied access to non-being by the light of life, which keeps them helplessly in turmoil. Because this light seems to obey an unknown force, it

is unable to turn away from these body parts. As a result, they are condemned to suffer *ad vitam aeternam*, as the stage directions and the structure of the plays suggest. In many ways, this punishment is reminiscent of the damnation of the soul in hell in Christian theology.

In Pinter's plays, death is more metaphysical. It signifies the loss of the lighted space of the room or home that guarantees the identity and security of the individual in a dark universe that is totally beyond human control. Pinter's characters, unlike Beckett's, are afraid of no longer being, of being swallowed up by the darkness outside. Their will is thwarted, like Beckett's suffering beings. In his place of refuge, Pinter's character is invaded by the darkness outside, where he inevitably drowns in the nothingness of existence, and ceases to be, dies.

In addition to the originality of their ways of representing death, the unnameable, Beckett and Pinter give it a tragic dimension. For Beckett, the tragedy of death lies in the eternal suffering of the being in its state of death, while for Pinter it is reflected in the image of the character struggling to cope with the slow death that the nothingness of existence condemns him to. Though contradictory, the frightening image of death presented by Beckett and Pinter reveals man's powerlessness and the tragic nature of existence in a world bereft of all its old certainties.

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