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‘Make Sense Who May, I Switch off’: The Acoustic Space of Theater in Samuel Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu*[*]

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Introduction

As a crucial element in dramatic performances, sound bears great significance in Beckettian theater. Samuel Beckett asserts, “My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept possibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin” (qtd. in Pattie 104). Beckett accentuates the role of sound and how it changes within his work. Jessica Tandy, playing the character known as the Mouth in *Not I*, once expressed her concern about the “extreme” speed of her narration; she worried if it would confuse audiences and cancel out the intelligible aspect of the play (Fischer 102). Beckett offers the playwright-director’s advice as follows: “I’m not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I want the piece to work on the nerves of the audience” (qtd. in Ackerley and Gontarski 411). What Beckett intends by having the mouth narrate at a great speed is to create a theatrical experience charged with emotional intensity and to have the audience affected by it. “Theatre doesn’t mind language’s failure” as Deb Margolin claims, “language onstage is just the certain needlework on a larger fabric of silence” (95). The emphasis on sound performance apparently does not underscore the essential role of narrative in Beckett’s theater. Dramatic performances of Beckett never exclude narrating voices distinctively characterizing fictional prose (Brater; Bowels).[1] The combination of many sound

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[1] Scholars from different academic fields validate the essential presence of narration in Beckett’s

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sources—performative voice, sound effects accompanied by theatrical actions, theatrical echoes, physical language, or even sounds of silence—bring openness to the auditor's participation in the meaning-making process.

Drama entails elements of orality and literacy. While the performative nature of theater marks the element of orality in drama, it requires textual materiality and script literacy. Distinguishable from the orality in primitive cultures, the performing orality founded on a textual medium in drama is akin to what Walter Ong names secondary orality (Farrell; West; Worthen).[2] The primary concern of this paper, *Ohio Impromptu*, dealing with how a past event is unfolded onstage is itself a narrative action. The narrative action in the play is formed via a stage prompt that provides the "script" of the play, one relaying character and another responding character. The characters onstage follow the written narrative and perform a reading ritual; the onstage performance, to a certain extent, alters the narrative structure of the textual medium. Employing Ong's theory of secondary orality in this paper explicates how the complementary relationships between the documented text and the performed action in *Ohio Impromptu* enrich theatrical sounds. First and foremost based on literacy tradition, secondary orality is "essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious

theater, and how dramatic performance and narrative complement each other. According to Enoch Brater, Beckett's writings and scripts entail oral performativity; when his texts and scripts are performed, they become incredibly accessible (ix). What is equally notable in this aspect is Hugo Bowels' interdisciplinary work entitled *Storytelling and Drama* (2010) in which he investigates various narrative episodes in drama, such as storytelling, gossiping, dream-talking, etc. These narrative forms bring dramatic effects and interpersonal dynamics to the linguistic studies of dramatic discourse. In particular, Bowels acknowledges taped narrations in Beckett as an innovative way of "unfolding monologue into the theatrical discourse" (176). In a similar vein, to merge the gap between narrative research and drama studies, this paper attempts to incorporate the theory of secondary orality and to readdress narrative and performance as drama's dual identity.

[2] Secondary orality or "literate orality" in Walter Ong's term plays a mediating role between literacy and orality (Ong 157). Referring to Ong as the pioneer of "orality-literacy studies," Thomas J. Farrell states that secondary orality for Ong is a "constellation of communication media that accentuate sound" (165; ix). Drawing from Ong, scholars address two kinds of mediation which occur in dramatic performances. Highlighting drama's dual identity as both a text and a performance, on the one hand, W. B. Worthen mentions that "the oral nature of theater" forms a strong connection with secondary orality (110). According to Worthen, "*Ohio Impromptu* is a rarity in the history of theatre in staging the book as the source of dramatic action"; the play reflects such a "condition of theatre" or its secondary orality (71; 2). Expounding upon Enoch Brater's "performative voice" in Beckett, on the other, Sarah West underscores a sense of "materiality" that mediates body/voice separation in Beckett's drama (12; 21). In *Say It* (2010), West reveals human voices inscribed onto theatrical materials or stage prompts as another form of mediation occurring in drama.

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orality," reversing the domination of sight over hearing in writing and print culture (Ong 115; 167). Illustrated with Ong's theory of orality, *Ohio Impromptu* presents an eccentric form of secondary orality, one that bears clear media awareness of writing and print culture. Moreover, what has given *Ohio Impromptu* a special place in the treatment of the sonic issue that concerns Beckett is its features within the performance regarding various ways of delivering the ritual narrative: repetitive and rhythmic narration, interrupted and evasive delivery, and moments of tacit silence. It is hoped that the attempt to incorporate Ong's theory of secondary orality while accommodating Beckett's strong emphasis on sound may contribute to the reading of *Ohio Impromptu*, being one of his most compact plays with vague characterizations.[3]

I. Mediation, Drama, and Sounds Onstage

Ohio Impromptu revolves around an essential off-stage event, recorded in a worn volume. The onstage character named Reader recites passages from the antique book, unfolding the narrative sequences in the play: how the one bereft of love finds consolation in a mysterious reading ritual, from which possible closure of the past incident is initiated. The written narrative established prior to the character's onstage recitation is made evident in the setting. The book placed before Reader "open[s] at last pages," indicating that what is to be performed had already been written down, and what remains is the process of repeating the narrative strand (445). Stating "[l]ittle is left to tell," Reader inaugurates the recital stage performance with an understatement of what follows (445). Differing from the dramatic conventions of Greek drama in which messengers directly relay off-stage events to facilitate plot progression, the narrator role in *Ohio Impromptu* is first and foremost mediated by the worn-out book. Considering the central role of the antique book, Beckett deliberately "make[s] the book visually effective" onstage (qtd. in West 196, footnote). Beckett demonstrates a clear consciousness of the play's material support as early as the beginning.

Unlike the title's suggestion, the dramatized narrative in *Ohio Impromptu* "by no means has the air of improvisation" (West 191). Reader's oral delivery of the written narrative is strictly structured around that in the antique book. Reader plays a

[3] My research found that *Ohio Impromptu* often serves as the capstone of Beckett's oeuvre. There is no coincidence that Brater in the preliminary pages to his *The Drama in the Text* (1997) and Worthen in his *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama* (2005) begin with this four-page play, from which they synthesize how drama and theatre function. However, the short length of the play seems to lead to overlooking its rich content, as it is often mentioned in passing or used to illustrate certain points in other plays by Beckett. Centering around *Ohio Impromptu*, this paper aims at providing more in-depth treatment of this minimalist play and probes into its rich theatrical elements.

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crucial role as a relaying messenger of the archived story, or as Brater puts it, a "verbal vehicle for a printed text" (qtd. in West 194). As the antique book prescribes, Reader recounts how the nightly ritual proceeded: "One night as he sat trembling head in hands from head to foot a man appeared to him and said, I have been sent by—and here he named the dear name—to comfort you. Then drawing a worn volume from the pocket of his long black coat he sat and read till dawn" (Beckett 447). At the end of the nightly ritual the sad man said nothing to the messenger and they "grew to be as one" (Beckett 447). The nightly ritual features a messenger reading to accompany the one bereft of love; this eccentric form of communication creates a bond between the ritual participants and leads to the dissolution of personal boundaries. What is more, the injection of the dashed commentary, "—and here he named the dear name—" underlies a sense of evasiveness; the ritual participants are intentionally kept secret (Beckett 447). Injecting the dashed commentary into the ritual narrative not only indicates the shifting of thoughts, but also has the overtone of concealing the identity of the "dear name," "I," and "he." Another climactic moment in the play occurs when the mysterious messenger signals the anticipated end of the ritual: "I have had word from—and here he named the dear name—that I shall not come again. I saw the dear face and heard the unspoken words" (Beckett 447). When the offstage yet significant role is to be revealed, similarly, the anonymous narrator's voice deliberately evades mentioning whose "dear name" is heard, whose "dear face" is seen, and what "unspoken words" are said to whom.

Quite coincidently, the above-stated narrative components of the reading ritual described on behalf of Reader bears remarkable resemblance to the theatrical spectacle of this particular play. The mysteriously unnamed characters and characters of blurred identities within the story frame resemble the two equally ambivalent characters onstage. When the curtain rises in *Ohio Impromptu*, Reader and Listener are dressed identically, wearing "long white hair," a "black wide-brimmed hat" and a "[l]ong black coat"; they appear onstage, ghostly figures with their "face[s] hidden" (Beckett 445). Beckett names them "Reader" and "Listener," only tethering them to these performing roles in the play. Listener and Reader accompany each other in a dimly-lit room, and the ghostly figures are just as the ritual narrative describes: "Stay where we were so long alone together, my shade will comfort you" (Beckett 446). There is an intertextual correlation between the staged narrative and the written narrative; an identical pair onstage performs a reading ritual similar to that described in the antique book. When the written narrative is performed via Reader's oral delivery, it reinforces such character ambiguity and interconnectivity across theatrical boundaries.[4]

[4] To further elaborate on the intertextual correlation between the staged narrative and the written narrative in *Ohio Impromptu*, it is feasible to consider the concept of intertextuality. As a common literary practice, intertextuality refers to the interdependent relation between texts; the interdependencies add multiple layers of interpretation to individual texts. Coined by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s, the Kristevan concept of intertextuality influences the practices of

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At first glance, *Ohio Impromptu* seems to be just another example of what Wilmer and Žukauskaite name "theaters of absent characters" (211); the flat characters simply "read" and "listen to" the play script, and resemble other puppet-like figures known in Beckett's theaters. Even though Reader's oral recitation shows signs of adherence to the original written narrative, his onstage performance is nevertheless a pure repetition of the same narrative. What enables the written narrative to be performed with differences is Reader's interaction with Listener. During Reader's oral performance, Listener onstage occasionally knocks to have Reader pause from the current recitation of the written narrative and repeat the passage delivered prior to the requesting knock. They do not directly speak to each other or look at each other; their tacit communication gains momentum along with the knocking sound. The characters' tacit interaction establishes a receding move to the previous stated narrative and slows down the unfolding of the written narrative. Most importantly, Listener's knocks and Reader's simultaneous responses add a spatial dimension to the narrative strand, as the acoustic knocks draw attention to the theatrical space where the characters are physically present: Listener and Reader both sit at table, "[f]ace hidden with their right hands on table and [b]owed head propped on right hand" (Beckett 445). They perform in their idiosyncratic world with their own *rhythm*. This onstage dynamic establishes a certain degree of autonomy in their performing role and informs a performative potential in Reader's oral delivery of the same narrative, while altering its pre-established narrative sequence.

Another example of how the dramatized narrative adds dynamism to the written narrative is made evident in the final scene of the play when Reader signals the end in his final statement: "[n]othing is left to tell" (Beckett 448). Starting with "[l] ittle is left to tell" (Beckett 446), *Ohio Impromptu* has achieved an inevitable end. As Reader gestures to close the book, a familiar sound of knocking is heard, requesting a re-read of the passage. Restating "[n]othing is left to tell," Reader then closes the book. Listener knocks again, and curiously this time Reader remains unresponsive to Listener's knocking request. Here, Beckett creates a ten-second pause to highlight the mutual gaze of the characters: "Simultaneously they lower their right hands to table, raise their heads and look at each other" (448). Described as "unblinking" and "expressionless" (Beckett 448), the intense gaze contributes to what Worthen calls "one of the most concentrated scenes of modern drama" (1). When Reader and Listener no longer perform to fulfill their assigned functions, in their mutual gaze the characters, as the written narrative prescribes, "gr[o]w to be as one" at the end of the nightly ritual

literary criticism in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1986), Kristeva famously states that "[a]ny text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (37). In this sense, the above-stated intertextual correlation in *Ohio Impromptu* is attuned to Kristevan intertextuality as the documented text and the performed action suggest interwoven and ambiguous relations with each other, and at the same time the two piece together drama's dual identity as a whole in this play.

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(Beckett 447). In the last ten-second fade-out, Beckett discharges Listener and Reader from their preassigned roles of listening to and reading the tale. Listener is absolutely Reader's intended audience, as Listener knocks to obtain responses from Reader who re-reads specific passages upon request. When they cease performing their distinctive character roles in the play and possibly assume other autonomous roles, metatheatrical effects arise.[5] Silence enhances the audience's spatial perception of the theatrical performance and its artificiality; it is the fact that audiences have been watching the written narrative performed onstage and now it has reached the end with the characters walking out of the theatrical frame. Such an effect of dramatic alienation lessens the audience's emotional engagement with the original narrative and raises attention to the overarching dramatic structure. The book's closing scene fosters a reflective opportunity of bringing together the spatial act of viewing the performance with the performance of the written narrative.[6]

Playing an essential role in the suspension and repetition of Reader's speech narratives, Listener's requesting knocks constantly interrupt Reader's delivery of narrative, and temporarily postpone the impending end of the sad tale. *Ohio Impromptu* features Reader's mediated voice, as his oral delivery is paced according to Listener's knocks. When the knock-driven narrative reaches an inevitable end, the stage image of the mirroring gaze underlies an imaginative doubling between the paired characters onstage and their counterparts within the story frame. In spite of the resolute claim "The sad tale a last time told. Nothing is left to tell" (Beckett 448), the evocation of the stage image cultivates a sense of stillness in time; the aesthetic doubling mitigates the "dead end," extending the storyline's structural impasses to an end that is ambiguous, indefinite, and open-ended. Such an aesthetic mirroring effect that delays the imminent end of the narrative is illustrated by Steven Conner in relation to the performative potential of drama. Conner asserts that "it may not be as absolute an ending as it may appear. It is the end of this narrative, but since the narrative is written down and always

[5] Martin Esslin, a pioneering figure in Beckett studies, comments on the "meta" moments in Beckett's drama. According to Esslin, metatheatricality is defined as a "radical devaluation of language," or more explicitly, "what *happens* on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the *words* spoken by the characters" (26; emphasis in the original). The last ten-second mutual gaze in *Ohio Impromptu* that extends beyond Reader and Listener's character roles, or the aforementioned intertextuality, bears resemblance to metatheatricality in Esslin's term. The intensified moment in the play breaks down the fourth wall of theater, draws the audience's attention to the play's overall status, and provides them with a wider perspective than what is in the play.

[6] A classic example of how theatrical sound adds a spatial dimension to the play is *A Doll's House* (1890) by Henrik Ibsen. Nora's door slamming at the end invokes a critical transition away from the gendered, domestic space into a realm full of liberating potential. As in *A Doll's House*, in *Ohio Impromptu* both Listener's knocks and the silent gaze between the characters contribute to the acoustic space of theater.

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available for repeated rereading, there is no reason why it shouldn't be resumed at a later date" (132). Performance has the potential of overcoming narrative deadlocks.[7]

As mentioned earlier, the sense of evasiveness and concealment is entailed in the written narrative and represented through Reader's oral delivery. What is supposed to be a first-person, intimate experience is narrated from a more general, third-person viewpoint. This self-distancing perspective culminates in the closing monologue of the play: "What thoughts who knows. Thoughts, no, not thoughts. Profounds of mind" (Beckett 448). This final soliloquy is uttered from a perspective of diminished subjectivity and permeable personal identity. John Paul Riquelme maintains that "Beckett's substituting of the third-person singular pronoun for the first-person singular […] enacts in the work's genesis the separation, distancing and demise of the formerly intimate self, which is no longer the *first* person, only *a* person" (405, italicized in the original). Indeed, one might ask: Whose life story is this? Does it belong to the one bereft of love, the mysterious messenger, or the onstage characters with similar appearances and equally ambiguous identity? Given the intercharacter correlations with the overtone of blurring subjectivity, *Ohio Impromptu* diffuses a fixed subject position of asking "whose" story this is. Reader's monologue is not merely his own but a conflation of voices, or what Riquelme names "polyphonic stage monologues" (397).[8] To sum up, in *Ohio Impromptu*'s acoustic space there exist performative narrations, acoustic knocks, the sound of silence, and the above-stated "polyphonic" voices. Among them, Reader's narration based on the pre-established narrative and paced with Listener's knocking requests is an example of secondary orality, to use Ong's term, as elaborated in the next section.

[7] This is also illustrated in Brater's *The Drama in the Text* in which *Ohio Impromptu* sits at the center of his main argument. For Brater, scripts are "ominously monumental," whereas in performances "something always on the verge of *becoming* each time we take words" (ix; emphasis in the original). While a "textual authority" is entailed in writing and script, great potential lies in performance (Brater ix).

[8] The creation of "polyphonic stage monologues" in Beckett where the "monologues that are not one" are both a derived form of modernists' hallmark styles as well as a "literary revolution" in response to it (Riquelme 397). Riquelme delineates that the modernist monologue often involves the dissolving sense of self, "self-annihilation," "palpable self-identity," and the questioning of the stable self (405). Even though Beckett's stylish writing shares similarities with that in the modernist tradition, Riquelme regards the cultivation of "polyphonic" voices as Beckett's signature.

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II. Material Consciousness and Secondary Orality in Beckett's Theater

Ohio Impromptu stages what had happened and been recorded in the antique book. The multidimensional aspects in the performance raise critical attention to what is beyond the text description, such as the above-mentioned intertextual correlation and metatheatrical effects. Bridging the spatio-temporal relations which exist between the written narrative and the performed narrative, the antique book frames the absence of presence in dialogue with what manifests onstage. The crucial role of stage prompts in Beckett's theater is not unfamiliar to Beckett's audience. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, the playing of the tape medium brings young Krapp into "the interactional present" and "complicates the addressee role"—whether the taped narrative is young Krapp's self-talk or the addressee is Krapp onstage listening to it (Bowels 176). Guided by the old ledger to find the significant spool of taped memory, Krapp listens to the recorded voice with his eyes closed, as the young voice states that "I close my eyes and try and imagine them" (Beckett 218). Instructed by the same narrative to perform similar actions of eye closing across theatrical boundaries, what Krapp and young Krapp have in mind, literally, is not on the same page. The spatio-temporal differences registered on the tape underlie the conflicting presences. As in the play, the onstage Krapp not only introduces his younger self's narrating voice, but also alters the structure of the taped narration via fast-backward replays of the sequenced memory. Except for young Krapp's participatory role in absentia, it is deemed necessary to take into account that Krapp's speaker role is physically present onstage to record his *last tape.* Cursing his younger self as "that stupid bastard" and his contested memories as "the sour cud and the iron stool," Krapp's performing body adds another layer of narration to the taped one in the making of a dual monologue (Beckett 222). The play ends with young Krapp's resolute claim in an "uninhabited" midnight: "Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back" (Beckett 223). In the tranquil night as quiet as thirty years ago, what is resonant to young Krapp—"No, I wouldn't want them back"—is no longer the same for Krapp. The tape runs on in silence; Krapp argues with himself no more, just blankly gazing before him. Young Krapp's voice diminishes within the mechanical noise; the silence is extended beyond the acoustic space of memory. Krapp fails to self-reconcile; his only redemption, if any, lies in the hands of the audience. Highlighting the setting of the play which happened in "[a] late evening in the future" (Beckett 215), Wan-li Chen argues for "a convergence of past and present" across theatrical boundaries; "the elderly man on stage is the audience's hypothetical future" (76).[9]

[9] In "Dynamic Explorations of Self-identity" (2019), Chen claims that the "performative aspect

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As the dramatic and metatheatrical effect in *Krapp's Last Tape* is obtained through object-mediated narration, or a contrast of dual monologue established in a sound archive and performative acts of listening and speaking, so is a similar effect established in *Ohio Impromptu* through juxtaposing narratives both in the visual archive and in the performative acts of listening and reading aloud. On the whole, Reader's oral performances and utterances—whether it be his natural pause within the moment of reading, the repetition of the ritual narrative upon Listener's knocking request, or the innate evasiveness—are predicated on the stage prompt. It is impossible to ignore Reader's frequent interaction with the antique book in his oral recitation. According to Beckett's stage direction, Reader interacts with the antique book 30 times in total. Reader pauses 15 times within the moment of reading; these natural pauses signal transitions from one meaning unit to another in Reader's oral delivery. Reader also interacts with the stage prompt three times in his actions of page turning, examining passages on the specific page, and turning to the page as the inscribed narration indicates. What is more, Reader's material-mediated narration is driven by Listener's knocking action. Listener knocks 11 times requesting that Reader pause, repeat, and proceed; Reader responds to Listener's knocking requests 10 times, excluding the last time when Listener's knock persists even after Reader closes the book. The use of Em dashes in the square-bracket stage directions shows Listener's sudden interruption of Reader's recitation. Another kind of Em dash is the injection of commentary dashes in Reader's oral delivery. The injection of commentary dashes, "—and here he named the dear name—," appears twice to signal a change in Reader's thoughts, digressing to conceal the identity of the significant other behind the scene (Beckett 447). The theatrical spectacle—Reader's interactions with the stage prompt and Listener—provides Reader with subtle autonomy performing his relaying role instead of being completely bonded by the printed narrative.

Why does Beckett present the contrasting double of a printed narrative and an oral performance of it? Why emphasize that the performance be script-based, instead of having the character memorize the lines and present them orally *without* the script? To broach what seems to be against the grain of drama, it is useful to situate the discussion within Walter Ong's theory of secondary orality. In his canonical work *Orality and Literacy*, Ong treats "the technologizing of the word" (171) in chronological order, ranging from oral tradition, manuscript culture, print culture, to the more recent secondary orality. Secondary orality is by no means the kind of orality subordinated to primary orality; its secondary order is defined in its temporal relation with primary orality developed in tribal, pre-literate culture. Characterized as "consequent and dependent upon writing and print," secondary orality is exemplified through object-mediated oral communication such as "electronically taped interviews," "talked books," and "sound tapes," or technology-mediated oral communication on "telephone,

of drama facilitates [the] non-linear presentation of narratives and dynamic explorations of self-identity in the trajectory of time (76).

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radio, television" (Ong 132-33). To investigate further, we should situate the discussion of secondary orality in relation to the print culture antecedent to it. Print culture "locks words into position in […] space" and fosters "a sense of closure," as the content of a printed text has been written down, finalized and contained within a particular space (Ong 119). Participating in print culture demands spaces of "personal privacy," "individual isolation," and "private ownership of words" (Ong 128). While print indicates that a text "has reached a state of completion" and shared in a "private space," secondary orality encourages "a communal sense" and "concentration on the present moment" (133). First and foremost based on literacy tradition, secondary orality is "essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality," reversing the domination of sight over hearing in writing and print culture (Ong 115; 167). Sharing similar characteristics with primary orality, however, secondary orality entails more media awareness of writing and print culture, and the process involved in "the manufacture and operation of the equipment […] for its use" (133).

From the above-stated, Ong's secondary orality serves as an overarching term that encompasses various forms of orality which are both predicated on printed texts and medium-mediated. As such, features of Reader's performed orality bear resemblances to it. Not a pure repetition of the printed narrative, Reader's performance demonstrates conscious responses to the printed tradition or the wider context it is based upon. The recursive structure of Reader's performative narrative is itself an open acknowledgment of Listener as the target audience in the performed context. Thus, Reader's performed orality delimits what Ong calls the "sense of closure" in writing and print culture (129). In the face of his auditor, Reader's substituting utterance—the "dear name" or "dear face"—curiously shows traces of precaution in revealing the mysterious "dear." Replacing the significant one behind the scene, the mysterious "dear" is repeated six times in total; each time in Reader's repetition it is surrounded by theatrical ambiguity and connectivity, awaiting other potential auditors in the social context to actively participate in the meaning-making process. To be more exact, the medium of orality possessed by Reader not only renders him free to perform the reading ritual with certain variation, but also opens up what seems to be an impasse in the completed, printed text.

Illustrated with Ong's theory of orality, *Ohio Impromptu* presents an eccentric form of secondary orality. Based on the antique book, however, Reader's orality medium serves a drastically different function than the printed medium entailed in the stage prompt. While the use of the antique volume reinforces the secrecy of the printed narrative, the performative act of reading aloud makes it public for the audience. As opposed to the spatial closure prescribed in the printed book, Reader's oral performance is uniquely dependent upon the performed context in which Listener's knocks direct how the printed narrative is delivered: when to pause, repeat, and proceed. In performance, Reader's oral recitation is no longer his own solo reading; the same ritual narrative is reimagined with the knocking sound of Listener, supplementing it with a sense of human togetherness. This mirroring, aesthetic quality

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fosters an essential part of *Ohio Impromptu*'s theatrical spectacle. The way in which the preexisting narrative is presented strongly resembles how Krapp alternates the structure of the archived sound narrative, as he fast-forwards, rewinds, and replays the tape. Both plays are mediated by stage prompts, initiating a sound narrative and adding a spatio-temporal dimension to the varying of the preregistered, archived narrative.

During the course of staging the reading ritual in *Ohio Impromptu* and the character's interaction with the recorded memory in *Krapp's Last Tape*, both plays maintain dramatic tension with the archived narrative.[10] Right before the end, both plays finally reach a critical point, divergent from what is entailed in the pre-established rituals. In the former, Reader's book closing and non-responding to Listener's request signal the inevitable end of companionship between the inseparable pair bonded by the reading ritual. In the latter, Krapp abandons his recording ritual on his 69th birthday, and in fierce self-condemnation demands his younger self to "[take] his mind off his homework" (222). Rejecting his self-indulgent memory certainly positions him in the most vulnerable position. Beneath the seemingly repetitive, non-progressive plots of the two plays lies the undercurrent of character transformation at the very end. For *Krapp's Last Tape*, Krapp's frequent bending over the machine in self-retrospect is replaced by his "staring front" listening to what his younger self proclaims, "No, I wouldn't want them [the memories] back" (223). Defenselessly facing his own memory alone, the 69-year-old Krapp repeats no self-avoidance acts, whether it be eating bananas, drinking wine, or fast forwarding archived memories. Neither does he have any need to record another tape for another auditor; this is literally his *last* tape. If there is any possible redemption for Krapp, it lies in the hands of the audience, as the play is set in "a late evening in the future" (215). For *Ohio Impromptu*, what sustains the reading ritual—the distinctive role of Reader and Listener—diminishes when characters suspend their actions that define their roles in the ritual. During the ten-second fade-out, action suspension produces glass-looking aesthetic effects onstage. Both plays demonstrate an elastic ending, stretching the impasse of the ritual performance into the seats of the audience. Such a centrifugal move succinctly contests what the archived ritual narrative entails and inaugurates a critical transition away from the original one.

Using Victor Turner's theory of liminality to explain, what *Ohio Impromptu* and *Krapp's Last Tape* stage is the transformative process of the characters during the rituals, moving from one life stage to another.[11] Originally a term coined by

[10] Both plays stage the processes of repeating the archived narrative, but with differences. The characters in their performing roles repeat the same narrative while alternating the pre-established structure of the archived narrative. What this paper observes for both plays is that the onstage dynamics transform the linear structured narrative into a recursive narrative pattern.

[11] S.E. Gontarski also illustrates that Beckett's theater occupies a liminal space. Beckett creates "virtual worlds that include past and present, material figures, imagination and memory; off-stage or what appears to be empty space is thus a virtual whole, a nothing full of possibilities, including

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Arnold van Gennep in his *Rites of Passage*[12], the liminal denotes the threshold stage of identity transformation in tribal rituals, marking the transitional period from the initial separation period to the reintegration period. While van Gennep emphasizes stage divisions and the ultimate result of reintegration of ritual-participants into the community, Turner emphasizes the "liminal phase" or "threshold" in his studies of rituals, furthering the liminal state in van Gennep into states of the pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. Without this crucial concept of the liminal, Turner firmly claims that ritual "becomes indistinguishable from 'ceremony,' [and] 'formality'"; "Ceremony *indicates*, ritual *transforms*" (*Ritual* 80; italicized in the original). In the above analysis of the two plays, the staging of rituals evokes a transformative process between the initial stage and the final scene. In *Ohio Impromptu,* characters undergo transformation during the reading ritual performed onstage; it starts with companionship between the inseparable pair, leading to the inevitable separation between the two characters. The initial stage of this process in *Krapp's Last Tape* features Krapp's self-indulgent nostalgia that kindles his memory archives; this is transformed into the character's defenseless vulnerability in the face of his own past.

Employing Turner's framework of the liminal sheds a different light on what theater historian Martin Esslin names the absurdist drama.[13] In his seminal *Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin addresses that the premiere of *Waiting for Godot* bewildered the European audiences and literary critics, leading to general criticism of the play's structural deficiencies: "lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense" (21). These public receptions have to be re-historicized as they are deeply related to Beckett's vanguard position in relation to the Aristotelian drama structure. As Michael Bennet states, absurd literature "counters the Aristotelian dramatic/narrative arcs"; "the writer or playwright simply foregoes any attempt at exposition: the characters merely appear and the story proceeds from there" (19-20). In a similar fashion, Turner regards the theatre of the absurd as "being more

all possible actions and movements" (Gontarski 8). Given these "in-between" attributes of Beckett theater, Gontarski deems it as "Neutral Theatre" (6-8).

[12] See Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

[13] A few prominent scholars in their recent publications advocate revising the "absurd" label coined by Esslin almost six decades ago. Instead of "theater of the absurd," Wei-jan Chi proposes "theater of the liminal." Borrowed from Victor Turner's "the liminal" that designates the ambivalent stage between "the unbound and rebound of sociostructural form," "theater of the liminal" conceptualizes Beckett's contemporaries such as Pinter whose characters straddle the line between the absurd and the realistic (130). Michael Y. Bennet suggests using the term "parabolic drama" to address the unique narrative structures of plays often associated with the absurd, as they "take the form of a parable" and "counter the Aristotelian dramatic/narrative arcs" (19). These paradigm shifts away from Esslin's label of absurdist drama do justice to the play and the context in which the play is situated.

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often the creation of individual than of collective inspiration and critical rather than furthering the purposes of the existing social order" (*Ritual* 113). In his later work, *The Anthropology of Performance*, Turner expounds the absurdist drama's "critical" approach to tradition or anti-structural potential, drawing its connection with the liminal's potential of transgressing threshold in van Gennep's rites of passage. "Although theatre of the absurd seems to have died a quiet death," Turner claims that absurdist drama appears as "a liberating force on conventional drama" (*Anthropology* 30). Turner's emphasis on the transformative process of rituals serves as a productive theoretical tool to unpack what underlies Beckett's gloomy theatrical images, alienation and despair. In fact, the portrayal of brooding, restlessly retrospective characters in Beckett's seemingly eventless drama embodies the power of re-creation. Contrastingly, Esslin's conception of the literal absurdity in Beckett, as influential as it once was, remains a form of centripetal criticism, or as a New Critics' approach in search of textural unity and coherence (Ackerley and Gontarski 3; Boxall 57).

Conclusion

The primary concern of this paper, *Ohio Impromptu*, was first performed in 1981 and is categorized as one of Beckett's very late works. Works composed in this time period have won him fame as a minimalist playwright, as they are compact in form and short in length. *Ohio Impromptu* is a typical example of Beckett's minimalist abstraction.[14] When compared with *Krapp's Last Tape,* staged almost 23 years earlier, *Ohio Impromptu* presents flat characters, distinctly different from the well-developed, rounded character in *Krapp's Last Tape*. E.M. Forster famously remarks that flat characters are not autonomous, self-fulfilling or have "big achievements as round ones"; they are "constructed (a)round a single idea or quality" so as to serve higher causes for the literary work (67). The characters in *Ohio Impromptu* lack characterization; Reader *reads* and Listener *listens*. The flat characters directly express pure abstraction of the functional roles Beckett intends to include in the play. Another prominent feature of *Ohio Impromptu* is that Beckett demonstrates a more diversified and inclusive treatment of sound than he does in *Krapp's Last Tape*. As opposed to where *Krapp* ends with the silence of human voices onstage, *Ohio Impromptu* concludes with the characters' mutual gaze. Their intense gaze amplifies what is vibrant within the sound of silence; it is an unwillingness to separate, to cease the tacit bonding. *Ohio Impromptu* derestricts theatrical sound to what is spoken or what can actually be heard; voices, interruptive noise, and intensified silence equally convey dramatic potentials.

Among the whole of Beckett's oeuvre, *Ohio Impromptu* in particular

[14] "The play [*Ohio Impromptu*] has all the elements of late Beckett" (Worthen 1).

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demonstrates a conscious response to the theater's role of staging drama's dual identity. While Reader's relaying act highlights a pre-existing textual authority in drama, Listener's knocking action adds to it a performative potential. It is no exaggeration to state that *Ohio Impromptu* literally stages the interplay of literacy and orality, and exemplifies theater's mediating role akin to secondary orality, to use Walter Ong's term. In response to the proliferation of criticism surrounding his works, Beckett states in *What Where*, dated in the same period as *Ohio Impromptu*: "Make sense who may, I switch off" (476). While the statement, "I switch off," is an overt expression of Beckett's medium consciousness, it is also manifested in the switching on and off of the tape recorder in *Krapp's Last Tape*, or the staging of theater's materiality in *Ohio Impromptu*. Switching off the author's voice accentuates the role of all theatrical sounds, demanding auditors to carefully listen, to bring openness to a multiplicity of viewpoints.[15] Just as Listener's knocking is an abstract form of tacit response, the performers, audience, readers, directors, and playwrights have their own interpretation attuned to their own eccentric context. Bearing a unique medium consciousness, *Ohio Impromptu* dovetails with the contemporary media-driven world, making this minimalist work a timeless classic.

[15] Gontarski doubts Beckett's attempt to have his art represent or simulate the world we live in, calling for critics to ask a different set of questions: "The apposite question may be less how Beckett was rendering the recognisable world than how Beckett was creating new and unfamiliar worlds, decreating worlds we thought we knew" (3). Beckett's stage, as Gontarski describes, "is always replete, full of potential meanings and worlds, of all the possibilities that theatre has to offer since it includes the whole of the past as well as the full potential to create new worlds" (8).

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「聽吧——我關閉作者之聲」：薩繆爾・貝克特《俄亥俄即興之作》的聲音劇場

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對於自己作品衍生的諸多評論，薩繆爾・貝克特在《何事何處》明確宣稱：「聽吧——我關閉作者之聲」。劇作家公開表達作品中聲音的本質，本文將透過《俄亥俄即興之作》進一步闡述。本文揭露貝克特《俄亥俄即興之作》雖爲文字精簡的短劇，卻容納豐富的聲音：人聲演示、動作聲響、劇場迴聲、肢體語言，甚至寂靜之聲。充滿聲響的劇場，帶來極富想像力的劇場空間。

論文第一部分闡明《俄亥俄即興之作》將書寫與口語敘事並置，於舞台演出呈現戲劇同時是文字劇本及舞台演出的雙重面貌。第二部分援用沃爾特・奧格的二度口述理論，進一步說明口語表演與文本的互通、增補關係如何豐富劇場聲音。口頭媒介的使用不僅讓劇中角色保有一定的自由度進行閱讀儀式，而且表演改變了原書寫敘事結構，並在書寫敘事陷入了僵局後，蘊藏開放性結局。《俄亥俄即興之作》是貝克特最緊湊、角色定位最模糊的作品之一，並具有高音韻性、非線性敘事的特點。本文融入奧格的二度口述理論並強調貝克特聲音劇場的特性，期盼對解讀此文本作出貢獻。

關鍵字：薩繆爾・貝克特　聲音　戲劇的雙重性　二度口述　媒介

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'Make Sense Who May, I Switch off': The Acoustic Space of Theater in Samuel Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu*[*]

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In *What Where* Beckett firmly claims, "[m]ake sense who may, I switch off." It is not only a prompt response to the proliferation of criticism surrounding his works, but also an overt expression of sound as a fundamental element of his art. This paper targets *Ohio Impromptu* to further the investigation of this issue. This paper delineates the rich theatrical sounds in this minimalist play—performative voice, sound effects accompanied by theatrical actions, theatrical echoes, physical language, or even sounds of silence—and how they accentuate theater as a visual and acoustic imaginative space.

The first part of this paper illustrates the juxtaposition of literacy and orality in *Ohio Impromptu* and how it stages the dual identity of drama as both a scripted text and an oral performance. The second half of the paper employs Walter Ong's secondary orality to explicate how the complementary relationships between the documented text and the performed action in the play enrich theatrical sounds. The medium of orality possessed by Beckett's character in *Ohio Impromptu* not only renders him free to perform the reading ritual with certain variation, but also opens up what seems to be the impasse in the completed, printed text. It is hoped that the attempt to incorporate Ong's theory of secondary orality while accommodating Beckett's strong emphasis on sound may contribute to the reading of *Ohio Impromptu*, one of his most compact plays with vague characterizations and nonlinear rhythmic narration.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett　sound　drama's dual identity　secondary orality　mediation

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