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**“The dead and gone. The dying and the going”<sup>1</sup>:  
S. Beckett’s *A Piece of Monologue*  
and C. Churchill’s *Here We Go***

## INTRODUCTION

The realisation of death’s inevitability and unpredictability has fascinated and terrified playwrights through centuries. As Mark Robson notes, “death has been the life-blood of theatre”<sup>2</sup> since its inception. However, the recent global demographic trends have enriched the discussion with greater attention being paid to the cultural significance of ageing and old age. While the increased life expectancy is a truly remarkable achievement for humanity, it also poses considerable challenges. There is therefore a growing need to scrutinize old age and ageing from a range of perspectives because, as Helen Small writes in *The Long Life*, old age is far too diverse a concept to permit easy generalisations<sup>3</sup>.

This article performs a comparative analysis of Samuel Beckett’s *A Piece of Monologue* (1979) and Caryl Churchill’s *Here We Go* (2015) and enquires into how both playwrights pursue an aesthetic of minimalism to approach and process death, loss, and ageing. The growing condensation and brevity of Churchill’s later plays, matched with indefiniteness of concepts of time and space, invites comparison with the pioneering works of Samuel Beckett, whose formal experimentation and minimalist aesthetic pushed the boundaries of playwrighting. Furthermore, the article investigates how Samuel Beckett and Caryl Churchill explore in the plays the propensity of old age to transgress the limitations of theatrical representation and to induce heightened awareness of the audience.

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<sup>1</sup> BECKETT S., *The complete dramatic works*, London, faber and faber, 2006, p. 429.

<sup>2</sup> ROBSON M., *Theatre & Death*, London, Red Globe Press, 2019, p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> SMALL H., *The Long Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 2.

**“BIRTH THE DEATH OF HIM”**  
**– A *PIECE OF MONOLOGUE* BY SAMUEL BECKETT**

H. Porter Abbott maintains that *A Piece of Monologue* marks the climax of Beckett's writing on death, which after 1950 is mainly expressed through the idea of mourning<sup>4</sup>. Haunted by a sense of loss, *A Piece of Monologue* tantalizes both the recipients and academics with its immense complexity. The play is brief and static, yet dense with meaning generated by the intimate interconnectedness of its elements: body, light, sound, space, voice, and story. Moreover, the intricate artistic arrangement of the monologue displays its poetic dimension through a distinctive use of language that exploits rhythmic regularity, sound features, and vividness of image. Enoch Brater observes that Beckett's later plays escape the easy categorization through which texts have been sorted and classified: “Genre is under stress. The theatre event is reduced to a piece of monologue and the play is on the verge of becoming something else”<sup>5</sup>. The entire stage image foregrounds the narrative action of delivering a monologue in a setting that could hardly be more austere. The white-haired Speaker, clad in a white nightgown and white socks, stands still with a lamp to his left and pallet bed, obscured almost completely by darkness to his right. The man tells a story about himself, about a man in his eighties (“Two and a half billion seconds”; “Thirty thousand nights”<sup>6</sup>, but he distances himself from the story and from himself by means of third-person detachment: “Birth was the death of him. Again. Words are few. Dying too. Birth was the death of him. Ghastly grinning ever since. Up at the lid to come. In cradle and crib”<sup>7</sup>.

The oxymoronic opening sentence interrelating life and death is yet another reformulation of the human condition that echoes strongly and persistently in Beckett's oeuvre since Vladimir reflected ruefully: “Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps”<sup>8</sup>. Hence birth is thought to start an irrevocable march towards death; and birth marks not just the beginning of our life, but also the beginning of waiting for its end. Abbott notes that “it [the paradox] seeks some point of absolute compression in ‘the one matter’ that is the play's subject”<sup>9</sup>. Rigorous artistic ordering further compresses the semantics of the text around “the one matter”<sup>10</sup>. The word “Again.” followed by the repetition of the oxymoron itself establishes the fundamental regularity of *our* predicament: we are born to die, again and again. The incongruous combination of life and death is emphasized by alliterative repetition

<sup>4</sup> ABBOTT H. P., *Beckett writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph*, London, Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 149.

<sup>5</sup> BRATER E., *Beyond minimalism: Beckett's late style in the theatre*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> BECKETT S., *A Piece ...*, p. 425.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> BECKETT S., *The Complete ...*, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> ABBOTT H. P., *Beckett writing Beckett...*, p. 151.

<sup>10</sup> BECKETT S., *A Piece ...*, p. 429.

of “c” “In cradle and crib”, which further ties the two notions together. However, it is the domination of death that overshadows the quoted passage, because the clusters of images: “Ghastly grinning” and “lid” evoke ghostly apparitions and coffins. Another example of the poetic organization of the text that brings together the notions of life and death is the recurrent description of Speaker, who peers through the window into darkness, standing motionlessly, but sees nothing: “Stands there staring out. Stock still staring out. Nothing stirring in that black vast”. The passage maintains a complex regularity best described by Roman Jakobson’s term ‘paronomasia’, that binds together semantically words that are similar in sound<sup>11</sup>. Here the consonantal cluster [st] knits together the expressions of death and stasis with movement and life, as well as fastens its beginning with its end (“stands” - “vast”).

Speaker utters his soliloquy “well off centre downstage audience left”<sup>12</sup> and his exact position specified in the stage directions entails manifold consequences. With the dramatic action reduced to the minimum, the middle of the stage remains empty. The unoccupied space marks a discernible shift of focus and foregrounds a sense of desolation, thematically developed in the monologue. The monological speech as such also has an important thematic function, for it reflects Speaker’s sense of isolation and alienation. Moreover, Speaker is paired with a lamp “Two metres to his left, same level, same height” whose “skull-sized white globe”<sup>13</sup> serves as a strong intertextual reminder of vanitas paintings symbolic of our mortality and the transience of life. The man and the lamp, orderly and symmetrically arranged on the stage, constitute as it were two pillars of the story, even more so when the change in the intensity of light complements the narrative and the lamp proves to be one of its significant elements. Immobile as the Speaker is, his story recounts movement: “first totters”<sup>14</sup> on bandy legs, uncertain steps from the window to look at the dying light to the lamp and to the wall and back again, ripping photographs from the wall and brushing their shreds under the bed, attending funerals in the pouring rain.

The careful organization of the text gives prominence to two rituals mentioned in the monologue: lamp-lighting and funeral. Each ritual is recounted three times and as Brater notes, subsequent accounts are “condensations of earlier descriptions”<sup>15</sup>. For example, the once-detailed narrative of Speaker’s fumbling with three matches and the “milkwhite globe”<sup>16</sup> and the wick to light the oil lamp is finally encapsulated in one sentence: “Lights lamp as described”<sup>17</sup>. Another set of narratives recounts scenes of funerals, with mourners looking at the “Black ditch beneath”. Additional-

<sup>11</sup> JAKOBSON R., *Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics* [in:] Sebeok T. (ed.), *Style in Language*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1960, p. 371.

<sup>12</sup> BECKETT S., *A Piece ...*, p. 425.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> BRATER E., *Beyond minimalism...*, p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> BECKETT S., *A Piece ...*, p. 426.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 428.

ly, they seem to be viewed from a high vantage point that makes it possible to see “Streaming umbrellas”. Therefore the perspective shifts from the focus on tiny details like “Bubbling black mud”<sup>18</sup> to the almost aerial point of view, which prefigures the image of Speaker looking down from above. Changing the position from which the scene is narrated influences the relationship between the background and the subject, Speaker both compresses and expands the objects of the scene: once he comes closer, once he moves away. It is yet another technique employed in the text to enhance the distance Speaker keeps from himself, from his own story. Similarly, the distance is reinforced when the habit of lighting the lamp is narrated as if it was performed by disembodied hands that appear in the faint light and disappear in the gloom of the room. On another occasion, Speaker says: “There in the dark that window”<sup>19</sup>, which, bearing in mind his habit of looking through the window, might suggest he is seen from a vantage point outside the house. Such solutions seem to enhance the *mise en abyme* technique that informs the structure of the play: the audience watches a white-haired old man wearing a white nightgown and white socks telling a story about a white-haired old man wearing a white nightgown and white socks, who sees hands clad in a white gown moving in the faint light. This mirroring technique can only add to the general sense of confusion and mystification the recipient experiences when coming into contact with a text that defies easy decodification. In a broader sense, *mise en abyme* highlights the propensity of the text to recur infinitely, as Speaker asserts, again and again.

These rituals are interlaced with passages where Speaker describes in detail his strenuous effort to pronounce a word. The account renders palpable the physicality of sound production: “Mouth agape. Closed with hiss of breath. Lips joined. Feel soft touch of lip on lip. Lip lipping lip.” The phrase “gathers in his mouth” and the whole situation is repeated “as before”<sup>20</sup>. Each time the articulation of the word requires considerable exertion, emphasised by rhythmical variations on the word “lip”. The word ends with a plosive “p”, whose articulation parallels Speaker’s exhaustion to utter the long-awaited word (the lips pressed together, the air momentarily blocked, the sound bursts when the lips release suddenly). The word Speaker is waiting for is called “the rip word”<sup>21</sup> and it is one of many unusual expressions used by Beckett in the play. Kristin Morrison suggests its meaning is a pun on “rip-tide” and considers it a pivotal metaphor that tears up the surface of the monologue to disclose its central theme and argues the rip-word is “begone”<sup>22</sup>. The dreary character of the monologue may as well suggest that Speaker confronts encroaching darkness through his repeated attempts to challenge the impoverishment of language (“Words are few. Dying

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 427.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 428.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 429.

<sup>22</sup> MORRISON K., *The rip-word in A Piece of Monologue*, *Modern Drama*, 1982, vol. 25(3), p. 349.

too”<sup>23</sup>). Difficult as it is, Speaker exerts himself and strives to articulate the word and his efforts are emphasized by exceptionally rich sound orchestration, which apart from the examples mentioned so far bring into focus the words “lip” and “rip” due to their sonic similarity. This device helps to conjure up a striking graphic image of closed lips ripped open when the word is finally uttered. If “a word” is to be considered metonymically as “a story”, as “literature” “the rip word” might be seen as “Birth” for it opens the play *A Piece of Monologue* and triggers the flow of speech with yet another plosive. The old man’s attempt to search for words to express his thoughts and memories might also be seen as fruitless and vain, for he is alone in the room and there is no one he might possibly address. However, when the soliloquy is considered in terms of theatrical communication, Speaker’s “word” is heard by the audience, which thus becomes the recipient of the message in the act of watching a performance. Anna McMullan notes the same conceptual duality when she asks: “In the late theatre, do we see these creatures as hardly human phantoms, or, through the acts of listening and viewing, are we positioned as an integral part of their struggle to be seen and heard?”<sup>24</sup>.

The repetitiveness, expressed in the monologue on various levels – sonic, verbal, kinetic – makes it possible to assume that the monologue might as well be said again and again, for Speaker shares with Beckett’s other protagonists an overwhelming urge to find proper words before death closes it all. Jane Alison Hale notes that: “The command “again” calls for repetition, which is the conceptual and linguistic mainstay of the text, as well as of the Speaker’s perceptual experiences”<sup>25</sup>. Therefore Speaker’s condition can be regarded as liminal, for it is marked by a perpetual state of transition rather than conclusion or resolution. The sense of liminality is best emphasized by the “faint diffuse light”<sup>26</sup> that bathes the room, both on the stage and in the story. Speaker persistently remembers or relives nightfall, or rather, “Every nightfall” when “Sun long sunk behind the larches”<sup>27</sup> and he gropes in the gathering dark of the room to light the lamp. Another source of light remains unknown: “Faint light in room. Whence unknown. None from the window. No. Next to none. No such thing as none”<sup>28</sup>. The elliptical phrases convey the fundamental quality of light that is on the verge of extinction, dying on these moonless, starless nights, gradually encroached by vast darkness that is outside the window, yet still glowing dimly in the gloom. Speaker prefers to remain posed in the indeterminate sphere and once he lights the lamp he “Backs away to edge of light”<sup>29</sup>. It is from this spot that he keeps staring at the blank wall that is the

<sup>23</sup> BECKETT S., *A Piece ...*, p. 425.

<sup>24</sup> MCMULLAN A., *Performing embodiment in Samuel Beckett’s drama*, New York, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 107.

<sup>25</sup> HALE J. A., *The broken window: Beckett’s dramatic perspective*, West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University Press, 1987, p. 115.

<sup>26</sup> BECKETT S., *A Piece ...*, p. 425.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 426.

emblem of his personal grief. Once covered with the pictures of his beloved ones, now “Forgotten. All gone so long”<sup>30</sup>, the wall bears signs of their presence for it is scarred with the pins that used to attach them. Some shreds remain pinned to the wall, some were swept under the bed, and like the words that Speaker’s utters, they are fragments of a bigger whole.

Speaker, his words, and light remain in a state of infinite finitude; where the end is impossible to attain. Enoch Brater notes that grey is the artist’s “serial motif” that allows him to endow the worlds on the stage with an indefiniteness that defies any sense of closure; or the other way round: it denotes the in-between phase that encompasses both the beginning and end<sup>31</sup>. The foot of the bed, the ceiling, the wall, the man’s gown, socks and hair used to be white “to take faint light”, but they have all lost their definiteness and the colour recedes into the zone of greyness. With his strength ebbing away (“Not enough will left to move again”<sup>32</sup>), the man is somehow connected and interrelated with the light, (“Like light at nightfall”<sup>33</sup>) for there is less and less time for him left to die. Visually this is most clearly articulated with the lamplight increasing in intensity when Speaker’s monologue is coming to a close.

Towards the end of speech Speaker, exhausted by his efforts to conjure up the past and staring into the dark abyss of the night stretching far beyond the wall, readdresses his existence as: “Thirty thousand nights of ghosts beyond. Beyond that black beyond. Ghost light. Ghost nights. Ghosts rooms. Ghost graves. Ghost ... he all but said ghost loved ones”<sup>34</sup>. The ghost modifies all elements that have been reiterated throughout the story, like light, nights, rooms and graves and engenders a sense of liminality, already persistently felt in Speaker’s narrative. The ghost, as observed by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Neither living nor dead, present nor absent, (...) functions as (...) the shadowy third or trace of an absence that undermines the fixedness of such binary oppositions”<sup>35</sup>. Ontologically fluid, never wholly glimpsed nor knowable, ghosts foreground Speaker’s condition, which is betwixt and between, in the present haunted by the past, at the same time the perceiving entity and the one perceived, still living but in the process of “Dying on”<sup>36</sup>, poised uncertainly in the liminal spaces hovering on the edge of light or pressing his forehead against the pane of the window. Speaker reveals his presence spinning his narrative in a theatrical act and simultaneously he undergoes a process of self-disintegration when his voice gets imprisoned in a vicious

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> BRATER E., *Beckett’s shades of the colour gray, Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, 2009, vol. 21, p.103.

<sup>32</sup> BECKETT S., *A Piece ...*, p. 427.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 426.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 429.

<sup>35</sup> WEINSTOCK J.A., *from Introduction: The spectral turn*, [in:] Del Pilar Blanco M. and Peeren E. (eds.), *The Spectralities Reader. Ghosts and hauntology in contemporary cultural memory*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 62.

<sup>36</sup> BECKETT S., *A Piece ...*, p. 426.

circle of stammering and elliptical expressions. Yet Speaker asserts emphatically that amidst the words which attempt to distract his attention, he needs to focus exclusively on “the one matter. The dead and gone. The dying and the going. From the word go. The word begone”<sup>37</sup>.

Speaker’s unshakeable conviction that all his thoughts and efforts should be crystallized into “the one matter” sparks off his strong urge to utter the word and to spin his story notwithstanding the ongoing dissipation of strength, words, and light. In this respect Speaker, like so many Beckettian speakers, resembles the author himself; whose style is pared down, as is his focus. As Beckett said in a conversation with Lawrence Shainberg, old age is more a chance rather than a hindrance to express the essentials, because paradoxically weakening resources can bring us closer to the truth:

It’s a paradox, but with old age, the more the possibilities diminish, the better chances you have. With diminished concentration, loss of memory, obscured intelligence – what you, for example, might call ‘brain damage’ – the more chance there is for saying something closest to what one really is. Even though everything seems inexpressible, there remains the need to express. A child needs to make a sand castle even though it makes no sense. In old age, with only a few grains of sand one has the greatest possibility<sup>38</sup>.

### “IT COMES AT YOU SUDDENLY DOESN’T IT” – *HERE WE GO* BY CARYL CHURCHILL

When Caryl Churchill’s *Here We Go* premiered at the National in 2015, many reviewers invoked two Beckettian paradigms – austerity and existential anxiety – to point out its most salient features. Despite some affinity Churchill’s play shares with Beckett, which will be given due attention later, what distinguishes both playwrights is their attitudes to political art. Beckett asserts emphatically the aesthetic autonomy of art, which refuses any social or political imperatives. By contrast, Churchill addresses the problems of the present with extraordinary prescience and mixes political and social engagement with creativity and experimentation. Her plays may serve as barometers indicating problems that beset modern man<sup>39</sup>. Beckett addresses suffering and anguish as an inevitable feature of human existence and eschews any idea of its remediability. For Churchill, theatre fosters the feeling of collectivity and has a role, though not expressed in a didactic way, to sensitize viewers to any form of oppression or injustice. In this respect the first striking difference can be observed in the way both playwrights structure their stage directions. Beckett, driven by a desire to retain the precision of his artistic vision, designed detailed stage directions that specifically

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 429.

<sup>38</sup> SHAINBERG L., *Exorcising Beckett*, Paris Review, 1987, vol. 29(104), p. 103.

<sup>39</sup> SUWALSKA-KOLECKA A., “*Up in the War Zone Ozone Zany Grey*”: *Caryl Churchill’s Theatrical Landscapes of Terror, Pain and Ecological Destruction*, Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism, 2017, vol. 24, p. 145.

defined minute details of his plays' performances; like movements of the characters or intensity of the light. This desire for authorial control calls into question, as Enoch Brater observes, the theatrical practice as such: "Stage directions multiply as Beckett begins to challenge the theatre's traditional function as a collaborative and interpretative art"<sup>40</sup>. In contrast, in *Here We Go* Churchill's brevity and compression of elements go hand in hand with a wide margin for cooperation and collaboration. Its language is pared down like in *Love and Information*, and it is therefore devoid of punctuation, pauses and character indication. Such a solution opens up another field for interpretation for it becomes possible for the director and actors to contextualise the text for a given performance, to endow it with his or her own ideas concerning the pace at which the lines are spoken, the pitch, as well as redistribution of the lines among the actors. In the notes to the play Churchill does not specify the number of actors, suggesting that it can vary roughly from three to eight. The playwright is equally liberal with the choice of their age and gender, therefore the directorial decisions concerning the cast have a profound influence on the semantics of the play performed. Churchill even suggests that there does not need to be any continuity between the main protagonist in the play, i.e. that the speaker of the monologue in the second section, and the old man being looked after by a career in the last scene do need to be the man whose funeral starts the play.

Structurally and thematically, as Mark Lawson observes, "Churchill's play becomes a triptych on the theme of mortality"<sup>41</sup> where the first part consists of the lines spoken at a funeral reception by the guests, who reminisce about the diseased man. In a manner typical for such occasions, old friends mix with casual acquaintances and gossip about him, the ceremony, and other guests. Owing to the method adopted by Churchill, the lines, fractured and elliptical, are at times so concise that recipients must supply missing elements through guesswork:

We miss him  
of course  
everyone  
but his closest  
because friendship was  
wider range of acquaintances than anyone I've ever  
gift  
closeness  
listened  
and so witty, I remember him saying  
listened and understood  
always seemed<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>40</sup> BRATER E., *Why Beckett*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1989, p. 107.

<sup>41</sup> LAWSON M., *Caryl Churchill's Here We Go: Eight actors in search of an ending*, *The New Statesman*, [online], 2015, December 10, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/nature/2015/12/caryl-churchill-s-here-we-go-eight-actors-search-ending>, [Accessed: 20 May 2022].

<sup>42</sup> CHURCHILL C., *Here We Go*, London, Nick Hern Books, 2015, p. 11.



From brief snippets of conversation there emerges a picture of a cat lover, a leftie married at least three times, quarrelsome at times, but often apologizing with a bunch of flowers. An anarchist in his sexual life, the man was an attentive listener to his friends and a voracious reader of literature; who lost his temper at cold-callers, van drivers, and nurses at the hospital when the pain grew unbearable. The polyphonic, fractured dialogue attempts to reproduce the moment-to-moment fragmentariness of life, which is further visualised by the photographs displayed in the room. Flashes of remembrance pass between the mourners, but life seems to divert their attention from death, and soon their conversation drifts to here and now problems: the motorway junction they have to take on their way back; their upcoming wedding; and a wonderful job in New York.

Meanwhile Churchill employs the Brechtian episodic form, whose progression is delayed by the interruption of scenes. There are ten speeches provided by the author at the end of the scene and their sudden intrusions into the storyline follow the instructions of the playwright: “They [the scenes] should be inserted randomly into the previous dialogue in any order”<sup>43</sup>. The director is at liberty to choose whichever scenes he or she wishes to provide to each character taking part in the funeral party. Similarly, the number of years given in each fragment needs to be tailored to a given character. As noted in the stage directions, the inserted scenes should be spoken directly to the audience, which only enhances the alienation effect. In the manner of Brecht, the digressive scenes are unified not temporally, but thematically, as each character gives details about their own deaths. Here are some examples: “I die the next day. I’m knocked over by a motorbike crossing a road in North London. I think I can get over while the light’s red but I’m looking for cars. I’m dead before the ambulance comes and it comes very quickly”<sup>44</sup>. Another character says: “I die eleven years later. I have a heart attack swimming in the North Sea in January. I’d done it before all right”<sup>45</sup>.

Since the characters remain “in the play”, their remarks are part of the internal communication system. However, since they know the exact details of their own death, they demonstrate knowledge that surpasses the abilities of any real person and a level of awareness that transgresses the insight any dramatic figure could have. Therefore when they address the audience directly they act more like “accomplices of the playwright” and establish a mediating communication system through which they inform the audience what is going to happen to the character in question. This strategy exposes the fictionality of the play and makes it a subject of a meta-theatrical comment. The punctuation of the intimate chat at the party with these randomly inserted remarks allows the dramatic figures to distance themselves from the action and comment on it “from the outside”. The epic mediating function of these remarks can be confirmed by the analysis of the relationship between these intrusions and the dramatic context, which is the after funeral party. Hence the remarks serve as a vehicle

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

to encourage *memento mori* reflection and, as in Brecht, the focus is not on an individual death, or an individual story, but rather on the inevitability and unpredictability of death as such.

The next section, entitled “After” is conveyed in a reflective, rueful, almost confessional mode; however the speaker, the dead man, is also capable of ironic detachment. He delivers his monologue at a very fast pace and its breathless, tumbling nature emphasises his anxiety and intensity of emotion. The recipient might have an impression that the man found himself in a limbo, as if suspended between life and death, facing an agonizing wait for the resolution of his situation. His monologue is packed with references to various religious representations of afterlife and clichés expressing common images, like falling down a tunnel, seeing light, or another shore. The punctuation is absent and the syntax broken down and fragmented, to capture the suddenness, spontaneity, and often inconsequentiality of his thoughts and impressions.

The speaker admits with a bit of trepidation that even though religious teaching does not focus as much on punishment as it did in the past, hell still remains a frightening option. The concept of hell is filtered through a contemporary sensitivity that questions it as a site of eternal torture and suffering, since you do not need to die to find yourself in a living hell, having in mind cancer, hurricanes, living in constant dread, or with a twisted mind that craves to kill or abuse children. His considerations of hell as a place of fire inflicting suffering on the guilty echo with questions pronounced in William Blake’s *The Tyger*, about the links between the undeniable existence of evil and violence in the world and the nature of a God who was capable of creating them. In the same vein, blending anxiety with humour and intellect the man recalls tenets of many theological and mythological systems; the gothic tradition and the scientific theory of energy redistribution to understand the situation and to assuage his fear of death. All these reflections aim to imitate the character’s thought processes in a stream of consciousness mode, with no punctuation marks and associative leaps. The multitudes of thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind are implied by just a single word or phrase, as in the case of the reference to a biblical story: “because I’m the rich camel who can’t get through”<sup>46</sup>. Similarly, Ammit, a goddess in ancient Egyptian religion who devoured the hearts of the condemned, is referred to as “lion hippo crocodile”<sup>47</sup> alluding to her appearance: she had the head of a crocodile, the front half of the body of a leopard, and the back half of a hippopotamus, but with goat arms.

Michael Billington calls the play “a striking *memento mori* for an age without faith”<sup>48</sup>, for the speaker addresses the concepts of after-life as advocated by all the

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> BILLINGTON M., *Here We Go review – Caryl Churchill’s chilling remainder of our mortality*, The Guardian, [online], 2015, 29 Nov., <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/nov/29/here-we-go-review-a-chilling-reminder-of-our-own-mortality>, [Accessed: 20 May 2022].

mentioned religious doctrines, only to undermine them repeatedly by saying: “but I don’t believe anything like”<sup>49</sup>, “ridiculous I don’t believe it of course”<sup>50</sup>, “he’s fictional (Odysseus) anyway so how can he get me out of this”<sup>51</sup>, “but surely that’s not a belief I’ve ever I’ve never”<sup>52</sup>. Another recurrent theme is the loneliness of the speaker when he realizes he is “on his own” and admits “I’m just a speck of sand in a desert”<sup>53</sup>. And although the monologue strives to depict the undiscovered country from which no traveller returns, it is overridden with a sense that we pay far too little attention to life when we are alive “I hardly noticed it going by”<sup>54</sup>. Concerned with analysing our mistakes and harking back to the past, we hardly notice our life’s inexorable march towards death and thus wish “another go would be welcome”<sup>55</sup>. However, a plea for another chance is ignored and the abrupt ending of the monologue with the word “suddenly” mirrors the unexpected nature of death:

you’re just a thing that happens like an elephant or a daffodil  
And there you all are for a short time  
That’s how it’s put together for a short time  
And oddly you are actually are one of those  
And it goes on and on and you’re used to it and then  
Suddenly<sup>56</sup>.

The last section, entitled “Getting there”, is an entirely speechless sequence of repetitive movements of an old man being helped to get dressed and undressed into nightclothes by a carer. The pantomime becomes a profound depiction of the limitations and vulnerability we experience when we are, as the title suggests, ‘getting there’. Again, as in the previous sections the stage directions leave the details of the actor’s movement largely undefined, Churchill stresses, however, that the process of dressing and undressing should be slow due to the pain and stiffness of limbs the ill/very old person feels. The script does not give the exact number of times the carer dresses and undresses the man, but instead it suggests the process should continue “as long as the scene lasts”<sup>57</sup>; thus the length of this section may vary in performance. Mark Robson considers such a solution as an unparalleled and unprecedented attempt to convey death’s inevitability and unpredictability<sup>58</sup>. The end of the scene will come, but nobody knows when.

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<sup>49</sup> CHURCHILL C., op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.27.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>58</sup> ROBSON M., op. cit., p. 18.

Dominic Cooke, who directed the play at the National in 2015, decided to consult a professional – a nurse from an oncological ward – for advice on how to stage the dressing and undressing of an ill person and in this way measure the length of the section<sup>59</sup>. As a result, the movement of the carer is mirrored in the most meticulous detail on the stage when she undresses the patient from his pyjamas and dresses him gently, lifts his body with the aid of a walking frame and helps him move from the bed to the armchair where the whole process begins again to change him back into his pyjamas. It is seemingly an endless process: buttons are undone one by one; stiff arms are released from the sleeves; trouser legs are tugged down; and the walking frame is positioned to let the Old Man shuffle to an armchair. The sequence is repeated twice and lasts over twenty minutes, Dominic Cooke notes it breaks the rules of theatrical presentation in many ways and instead resembles live art installation. Its silence and painful slowness stands in stark contrast to the torrent of words of the previous section.

The play received mixed reviews, which can be accounted for by at least two, potentially related, explanations. Firstly, the vast stage and the auditorium at the National (Lyttelton) might not have corresponded well with the intimate spirit of *Here We Go*. Moreover, the bold, experimental character of the play, especially the non-dramatic last section, might have posed a considerable challenge to the expectations of the audiences, who were not acquainted with such extended periods of silence in theatre. Dominic Cavendish, for example, wrote the play is a work of “sheer tedium” whose “coda seems determined to bore us to death”<sup>60</sup>. Marianka Swain admits the last section might be “poignant and effectively purgatorial, but the effect dissipates over a gruelling 20 minutes”<sup>61</sup>. Many reviewers noted that the silence and repetitiveness of the last section brings the audience to the limit of their endurance, but they discern at the same time the effect this solution exerts on the viewing public<sup>62</sup>. On the one hand, the painstaking routine of the last section is unbearable because we want to avert our gaze from what our culture hides, i.e. old age and frailty. At the same time however, by prolonging this section Churchill makes silence resonate with poignancy; it is a powerful, yet speechless, manifestation of the indignities that plague people as they

<sup>59</sup> COOKE D., Digital Audio recording of platform with Dominic Cooke discussing *Here We Go*. Chaired by Fiona Mountford. National Theatre Archive, 2015, November 30.

<sup>60</sup> CAVENDISH D., *Here We Go*, *National Theatre*, review: *sheer tedium*, The Telegraph, [online], 2015, November 29. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/here-we-go-national-theatre-review-sheer-tedium/>, [Accessed: 15 May 2022].

<sup>61</sup> SWAIN M., *Here We Go*, *National Theatre*, review: *Poignant, but gruelling*, Ham&High, [online], 2015, December 12, <https://www.hamhigh.co.uk/news/here-we-go-national-theatre-review-poignant-but-gruelling-3743990>, [Accessed: 18 May 2022].

<sup>62</sup> See, LAWSON M., *Caryl Churchill's Here We Go: Eight actors in search of an ending*, The New Statesman, [online], 2015, December 10, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/nature/2015/12/caryl-churchill-s-here-we-go-eight-actors-search-ending>, [Accessed: 20 May 2022]; MCKIE L., *Review: Caryl Churchill's new play about the end of life*, Londonist. [online], 2015, 28 November, <https://londonist.com/2015/11/a-bitter-sweet-short-at-the-national-caryl-churchill-s-new-play-about-the-end-of-life>, [Accessed: 20 May 2022].

grow older. In fact silence, matched with the tedious routine, signifies far more than speech ever can and the playwright makes us watch it. Patrick Godfrey, starring at the National as the Old Man, exposes his limited capacity; his blank stare and confused expression may indicate serious cognitive impairment. The authorial arrangement of the sections, whereby the funeral reception opens the play, enhances the impact of the final scene, as the depiction of a vulnerable old man is contrasted with the way the mourners remember him.

The play manoeuvres the audience into focusing their attention on the old man, because earlier they witness his funeral party and afterlife considerations. Such an arrangement of scenes makes the other character, the carer, almost superfluous. We watch her movements, but throughout the scene she remains as if invisible, and the impression is strengthened by the old man’s vacant stare, unaware, it seems, of her presence as well. Thus Churchill shows the old man and the carer as two sides of the same coin: increased age requires the help and support of a career. The reflection on ageing is not only limited to the sense of loss the old man must be experiencing, but it also entails reflection on a wide range of impacts and consequences of caring. The carer’s invisibility symbolically communicates the loneliness carers experience while managing and performing their mundane caring roles, especially looking after cognitively impaired patients. Seen from this perspective ageing is not only treated as an individual experience, but as a social challenge, proven and verified in the statistical data which state that around 6.5 million people in England and Wales are carers providing support for their family members or friends who are frail or disabled<sup>63</sup>. Though obviously challenging in many ways, being a carer can be hugely rewarding as well, as noted by one of the mourners: “you do love who you look after and who looks after you”<sup>64</sup>. Significantly, again the carer is speechless, briefly noted by one of the party guests. In this way, through this particular kind of silence and muteness the play seems to call for greater emotional and practical support for the carers.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, both plays deal with the embodied experience of ageing, loss and death, and explore the potential of theatrical brevity to convey a sense of temporality in both theatre and in life. Beckett’s play resembles an extended poetic image whose minimalism parallels the diminishing powers customarily associated with ageing, failing memories and bodies, and decreasing capacities. The old man, his words, and the light are dying and the encroaching darkness diminishes his ability to move, to remember, and to tell a story. Yet, the minimalist aesthetic shifts attention to the vanishing, to the barely present, to something that is hardly there, but still resists obliteration: the need to express. Although the process of annihilation continues and

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<sup>63</sup> Office of National Statistics, *2011 Census - unpaid care snapshot*, 2013, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/carers-week/index.html>, [Accessed: 25 May 2022].

<sup>64</sup> CHURCHILL C., op. cit., p. 18.

the vision of death is imminent, Speaker continues to tell his story, to share his experience, and he continues to persist with “the one matter. The dead and gone. The dying and the going”. Paraphrasing Beckett, “a few grains of sand”, i.e. the limited resources of old age, have the potential to build, to construct a story that may unravel the mysteries of life. Moreover, the artistic arrangement of the text activates the manifold connections among the constituent elements of the story, like sound, image, and light; which significantly enhance the semantic potential of the play. In Churchill’s *Here We Go*, the play’s brevity, combined with the loose, episodic structure of the first two sections, corresponds directly with the shortness of human life, which is repeatedly underlined by various means. Here we for a short time get used to living and take it for granted – until we are suddenly gone. The last section, however, with its extended period of silence filled with repetitive, mechanical movements, more resembles the limbo of old age in which Beckett imprisons his character; a limbo manifested through loops and continually recurring actions and motifs. Therefore in their investigations into age and death both playwrights escape the demands of chronology and teleological narratives and employ daring and imaginative solutions to challenge the medium they work in and the conventional expectations of theatre audiences. Additionally, in Churchill’s case this brevity is combined with allocating much freedom to the director and actors to decide about the final shape of the play. Therefore the playwright opens up her short form to a number of possibilities and endows the recipients with the possibility of active and creative participation. As in Beckett, the shape of the language used in the play performs in a way a similar function, for it draws our attention to the text itself, activates connections between words, and intensifies the poetic function of the language Churchill uses in her play. As a result, the complexity and intricacy of *A Piece of Monologue* and *Here We Go* demand greater attention from the audience and encourage their metatheatrical reflection on the fundamental properties of theatre. In both cases less means more and the short form has a great potential for meaning.

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**“The dead and gone. The dying and the going”:  
S. Beckett’s *A Piece of Monologue*  
and C. Churchill’s *Here We Go***

**Abstract:** This article reflects on Samuel Beckett’s *A Piece of Monologue* (1979) and Caryl Churchill’s *Here We Go* (2015) as plays that engage with the theme of “the dying and the going”. Both playwrights are internationally renowned for their theatrical innovation, hence this article investigates how their plays explore the propensity of old age to transgress the limitations of theatrical representation and to induce heightened awareness of the audience. Beckett’s play resembles an extended poetic image whose minimalism parallels the diminishing powers customarily associated with ageing. Yet Beckett’s minimalism redirects the focus on what almost perishes, ceases to be, and affirms Speaker’s urge to tell a story and to persist with “the one matter.” As such, the limited resources of old age are not considered as a hindrance to addressing the mystery of human existence and instead become empowered by the artistic arrangement of the text. Caryl Churchill’s *Here We Go* resembles a triptych and its three parts employ first dialogue, then monologue, and finally resort to silence to address our mortality. The play’s brevity and the diversity of applied aesthetic and structural solutions are matched with a script that gives the director and actors ample scope for artistic freedom and creativity. Therefore in their investigation into old age and death both playwrights escape the demands of chronology and teleological narratives and employ daring and imaginative techniques to challenge the medium they work in and to confound the conventional expectations of the theatre audience.

**Keywords:** Samuel Beckett, *A Piece of Monologue*, Caryl Churchill, *Here We Go*, ageing, death

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