NAMES, Vol. 58 No. 1, March, 2010, 5–12

# The Study of Names in Samuel Beckett's Texts: Problems and Prospects

TATYANA HRAMOVA
*University of Reading, UK*

The article tries to understand and make a critical evaluation of the directions the study of names and naming in Samuel Beckett's texts has taken in the last fifty years. It is argued that, despite many works dedicated to the subject, this field of Beckett studies has never been looked at within the framework of its own tradition and development, and hence it has not as yet acquired an independent status and remains an appendix to other fields of Beckett criticism. The article also suggests a course the study of names in Beckett might take in future and invites scholars to enter into a dialogue.

KEYWORDS Samuel Beckett, literary onomastics, names of characters, authorial name

In 1980 Frederick Busi noted that "Beckett's handling of names is just as rich as Joyce's although it has not yet attracted as much critical commentary" (38). More than a decade later, in 1994, Sidney Feshbach made a comparison between Beckett's and Joyce's usage of names, stating that while there is quite a substantial number of books on names in Joyce, "there is no book like this for Beckett's names" (615). In 2001 Jeremy Parrott tried to provide a brief overview of the critical study on Beckett's nomenclature. Commenting, in most cases unfavorably, upon seven works of criticism of different length and relevance (27–32), he observed that "no full-length monographs [on names] in Beckett's fiction have so far been produced" (29) and concluded that "names in dramas [. . .] have [. . .] been subjected to far greater critical commentary than names in fiction" (67).

In fact, before 1980 there was hardly an article that did not look at Beckett's naming practices in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, as well as at least four attempts to summarize everything that had been written on the subject. At the time when Sidney Feshbach encouraged scholars to write a book on names in Beckett (1994: 615), it had been fourteen years since Frederick Busi published his monograph *The*

© American Name Society 2010 DOI 10.1179/175622710X12590782367946

*Transformations of Godot*, which attempted to demonstrate Beckett's technique of character naming through the names in *Waiting for Godot*. Finally, by 2001, there were at least eleven works that concentrated exclusively on names and more than thirty that used names and their meanings to prove a wide range of philosophical, psychoanalytical, religious, and many other interpretations and theories. Approximately two-thirds of these studies paid attention either to *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*, whereas most names in Beckett's other plays and his fiction have been ignored for many years.

The aforementioned observations immediately point to several problems that the field of Beckett studies dealing with names faces. Firstly, the fact that every research on names neither depends on each other nor refers to each other calls into question the rightfulness of calling the body of works written on the subject "a field of Beckett studies." Moreover, it seems that most scholars have always seen the analysis of names as a mere appendix to or additional evidence for whatever idea they wanted to prove, and, as a result, a separate branch of Beckett criticism that would deal exclusively with names is still in the process of development or — however paradoxical this may sound — in the process of coming into existence. This, however, leads to the second problem, because then a much-acknowledged gap in Beckett studies is, on the one hand, a sad fact and, on the other, a cosy myth of ignorance. Stuck in endless repetition of what seem to be key ideas, each article and monograph on names is bound to be unproductive because it is cut off from "tradition," and, nevertheless, it is *there*, establishing and at the very same time filling the "gap." Thus, in order to see the study of names in Beckett as a distinct field, it seems to be necessary not to incessantly acknowledge the elusive "gap" and start everything anew, but rather to understand what is already there — has always been there — to show how it developed and what still needs to be done.

Despite the fact that the index in Cathleen C. Andonian's *Samuel Beckett: A Reference Guide* states that A.J. Leventhal's 1964 article in the *Lettres Nouvelles* "Le Héros de Beckett,"[1] based on a lecture delivered at Trinity College Dublin in 1963, was the first critical study of names in Beckett, and even despite Jeremy Parrott's assurance that it was Leventhal who made "impressive first steps" (2001: 27), it seems that Edith Kern and her "Drama Stripped for Inaction: Beckett's *Godot*" published in 1954 sparked the interest in Samuel Beckett's naming techniques. After this article, which discussed a possible meaning of the name Godot and noted the name to bear "witness to Samuel Beckett's genius" (46), there was hardly an interpretation of the play that would not attempt to unravel the mystery of Godot's name. Eric Bentley (1956), Jean-Jacques Mayoux (1957), Hugh Kenner (1959), Ruby Cohn (1962, 1973), Harry Butler (1962), Bernard Dukore (1962), S.A. Rhodes (1963), Jacobsen and Mueller (1964), Nathan Scott (1965), and Émile Lavielle (1970) were among those who contributed to the many-faceted inexplicability of the name Godot. Their suggestions were summarized by Leonard Cabell Pronko (1964), Colin Duckworth (1966), Melvin J. Friedman (1970), and Guy Croussy (1971), some of whom offered their own addition to "to the imposingly long list" (Friedman, 1970: 24), while others turned to discuss remaining names in *Waiting for Godot* as well as names in *Endgame*, *Watt*, and *Molloy*.

It is important to note that the early period in the study of names in Beckett is characterized not only by assiduous attention to the name Godot, but also by cautious

reservations, almost contempt, that scholars expressed for the subject. For instance, after dedicating a paragraph to the analysis of names in *Endgame*, Leonard Cabell Pronko hastened to assure his readers that "these interpretations seem to add nothing essential to the meaning of *Endgame*" (1964: 44). Colin Duckworth, in his turn, spends several pages pushing "imaginative interpretations" (1966: cxiv) of the name Godot further and further, only to conclude that "theorizing about the name is not a very fruitful exercise" (cxvi). In order to justify a few pages that he dedicated to these "futile" activities, he explains that "time has been spent on it here only because some very reputable scholars and critics have spent time on it, and this the reader should know" (ibid.). Melvin J. Friedman is even more harsh when he contemptuously refers to the "reputable scholars and critics," pioneers in the study of Beckett's nomenclature, as "Godot-hunters" (1970: 22), claiming that "there is probably no phase of *Godot* commentary which has amused Beckett quite as much as this" (24). Finally, A.J. Leventhal, whose article "Le Héros de Beckett" is ignored by all four scholars in their summaries of earlier studies on Beckett's naming, is one of the first to evaluate names and their usage, to try and see them in context of a text and each other. Leventhal manages to encompass the names from several of Beckett's texts, including *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Watt*, before admitting that he does not "pretend that this helps to any great extent in the evaluation [of the works]" (Leventhal, 1965: 49). The reason for such a caution whilst analyzing Beckett's names seems to lie in the writer's own reluctance to discuss his work in general and the identity of Godot in particular. Concerning Godot, Beckett once famously said that, if he knew what Godot was, he would have said so in the play (Levy, 1967: 75). For many Beckett critics of the early period, analyzing the name was apparently equal to finding its "true" meaning, and thus inevitably establishing, or at least suggesting, something particular about the character, which, as they presumed, would go against Beckett's determination to leave Godot an enigma. This respect for the author, timidity — perhaps even fear — before the author resulted in the names being analyzed "tongue-in-cheek" (Friedman, 1970: 24), half-jokingly. The importance of names in understanding Samuel Beckett's fiction had thus been denied for almost twenty years.

The appearance of Frederick Busi's articles "Naming Day in No-Man's-Land: Samuel Beckett's Use of Names in *Waiting for Godot*" and "*Waiting for Godot*, A Modern *Don Quijote*?" in 1974 was therefore a landmark in the development of the study of Beckett's naming. Starting one of the articles by expressing understanding of the tendency not to assign "meanings to the character names of Beckett's theater," Busi was the first to acknowledge that the names might not have a "true" meaning and that "the multiple meanings of character names indeed reinforce Beckett's esthetics of deliberate equivocalness and ambiguity" (1974a: 20). Later he used much of the articles in the first monograph on Beckett's names, which was published in 1980 under the title *The Transformations of Godot*. With this book, theorizing about names finally became fruitful, as for Busi Beckett's names did not so much unfold the self as protested against it.

Hence it seems that Jeremy Parrott pronounced too definitive a judgment when he called *The Transformations of Godot* "a rather erratic book," "trawling far and wide for meanings" (2001: 29). Apparently Frederick Busi's readings and argumentation

failed to convince Parrott because they would not pass something he calls the "Knowlson test" (ibid.); in other words, according to Parrott, in his reasoning Busi did not seem to take into consideration Samuel Beckett's intentions or the probability that Samuel Beckett was aware of certain things suggested by a name. It is obvious, however, that in his book Frederick Busi was less interested in meaning than meaninglessness, that is to say, he seemed more concerned with the lack of a name than a name *per se*, and as a result he was also more concerned with Beckett's texts than with Beckett. Busi did not search for the truth in *The Transformations of Godot* but tried to demonstrate the suggestiveness of a name that cancelled itself out, and by this he may not have convinced Parrott, Beckett's biographers, or even Beckett himself, but he definitely managed to give an absolutely new perspective on the names and their importance in Samuel Beckett's texts.

Frederick Busi's works started a new period in the study of Beckett's names, which was marked by the growing interest in the author's usage of names, not only in *Waiting for Godot* but also in his other plays and, to a certain extent, in his prose works. During this period Beckett scholars paid particular attention to the richness and ambiguity of the names, as well as to the ways in which they describe a character. In 1976, William Tritt made the first attempt at a systematization of names in *Murphy* by arranging them into different categories. The fact that in a ten-page article its author did not try to evaluate names or "decode" them represents a gradual shift in the study of Beckett's naming techniques from the "true" meaning of the names to the names as such.

Thus, in his 1977 article "Names in Beckett's Theatre: Irony and Mystification," Jesse Levitt looks at the names in several Beckett plays emphasizing their semantic richness and, in 1979, Gerald Bello submits the first volume of a proposed three-volume *Dictionary of Proper Names in Samuel Beckett's Works* as a doctoral dissertation. The dictionary includes place names, brand names, and names of characters starting with the letters from A to G, and discusses a wealth of historical and mythological allusions. Trying "to find characters' dominant traits" (1979: 246), Martha O'Nan treats the names in *Waiting for Godot* as polysemantic signs and concludes that "there is something of man's million years" in these names — "something more than [. . .] Belcher means 'to belch'" (256). M.F. Vaughan also turns to Beckett's most famous play and discusses the diminutive in the name Godot, pointing out that it "carries such a complex range of meanings and tones, we cannot conclude anything simple about Beckett's attitude toward *God* or *Tod*" (1980: 122). Phil Baker, in his turn, claims that "over-determination of names is a noticeable feature of the Trilogy" (1991: ii) and underlines that even the inclusion of "autobiographical" names "is in conformity to his [Beckett's] major figure of repetition, with the re-usage or re-circulation of finite elements from previous life as well as previous writings" (iii).

As a result, the name in Beckett's works finally came to be understood as a device for creating ambiguity and delivering the character from its "physical" identity, rather than a tool for establishing this identity. Gradually, Beckett's life started to be seen not as the definite reality against which one should evaluate his work but as a part of his oeuvre, and the writer himself turned into the name, which can be transformed and played upon, recognized in other texts and names (Ellis, 2007: 45) — which can be encrypted in a text, read as a text, which can *be* a text. In other words, Beckett

became nothing more — and nothing less — than a sound; and such poets as Paul Muldoon have taken delight in looking for resonances in his name and "rewriting" this name as a poem (Muldoon, 2000: 12–18). According to Jonathan Ellis, for Paul Muldoon — and, we may add, for many critics of the second period — Beckett's opinion is unimportant and Beckett *per se* is irrelevant, because he has turned into somebody "whose true identity can only be found in words" (45). Therefore "Beckett [. . .] *is* language" (56), and the authorial name, as Leslie Hill has claimed, "does not function as a mention of authorial presence but rather as an integral part of the writing of the text" (Hill, 1990: 115).

Leslie Hill began to develop his theory on Beckett's naming with the 1983 article in the *Oxford Literary Review*, "The Name, the Body, *The Unnamable*," which later grew into the chapter of his book *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words*. Proclaiming the name to be false for most of Beckett's characters, Hill warns against taking them too literally and sees them not as "identifiable labels" but as "moments of transformation, dispersion, dissemination" (Hill, 1990: 112). By this he seems to follow — unconsciously, as it always is the case in the study of Beckett's names — ideas expressed by Frederick Busi in *The Transformations of Godot*. Moreover, when he claims that "the project of Beckett's writing is an attempt to spell [his] cryptic other name" (106), letter M serving as "a stigmatum or signature" (113), he, again unconsciously, develops A.J. Leventhal's early observation that many names in Beckett's fiction echo the monosyllabic "Sam," the initial S of which, in Beckett's handwriting, always looked more like an M (Leventhal, 1965: 48). Leslie Hill, however, does not seem to share Leventhal's opinion that Beckett's incorporation of his name into the text is "not essential to the work itself" (ibid.). On the contrary, in his book he claims that Beckett's "writing becomes a commentary on the name" (Hill, 1990: 115), the latter being inseparable from the body in its constant process of reinvention.

In "On Names in James Aloysius Augustine Joyce and Samuel Barclay Beckett," Sidney Feshbach also speaks about the relationship between the name and the body in Samuel Beckett's texts. According to Feshbach, though, Beckett's names are devoid of people and function as mere "labels for stick-figures" (612). He seems to disagree with Hill in his claim that by removing "the substance from the world named" and "hollowing the wordly density of names" Beckett not only intensifies "the wordly qualities" of names themselves but also reduces fictional identity (606). Although Feshbach was apparently as unaware of Hill's study of names, as Hill of the works by A.J. Leventhal and Frederick Busi, one can see that at the end of its second period, that is to say by the year 2000, the field of Beckett criticism dealing with names finally entered a stage when one can speak, if not of an exchange of thought, but at least of a certain unconscious dialogue.

The last period in the study of names and naming techniques in Beckett commenced in 2001 with Jeremy Parrott's doctoral thesis *Change all the Names: A Critical Onomasticon of Characternyms in the Fiction of Samuel Beckett*. In this work Parrott sets out "to list and analyse all characternyms in Beckett's published fiction" (65), stating that every author's "duty" (16) is to choose a name "which functions as an appropriately meaningful sign within the text" (17), and hence the "task" of the "ideal reader" is to decode or reconstruct the names previously "encoded" by the author (ibid.: 17, 32, 33, 70).

The idea of the author as the encoder and the reader as the decoder returns the study of Beckett names fifty years back, to the early period of its development when a certain "meaning" or "truth" was sought in a name. Strangely enough, in his work Parrott himself acknowledges that "no ultimate 'truth' is to be found in any one reading of any one name" (2001: 68). Nevertheless, he also seems to believe that all the multiple meanings were predetermined by the author, and that by coming through Parrott's own "critical filter, which is undoubtedly finer or coarser than that of other readers," the interpretations of names offered by him are not "mere invention [. . .] but roughly approximates to what the author originally encoded, at whatever level of intentionality" (2001: 45).

In fact, many of the interpretations included in the onomasticon are at least unconvincing and, naturally, have nothing to do with Beckett's intentions, which, fortunately for Jeremy Parrott, we are not destined to know. The main drawback of the onomasticon, however, is in its inconsistency. Even if we assumed that it is fruitful to interpret more than a third of all the character names in Beckett's texts as mere autobiographical references, and even if we agreed to take it for granted that, for example, fictitious Miss Fitt in *All That Fall* can have any connection to a boy (!) (Knowlson, 1997: 428), E.G. Fitt, with whom Samuel Beckett played cricket at Portora (Parrott, 2004: 283), it still remains unclear why Elliseva of Beckett's *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* is only a "nonce-name [. . . meaning] 'the daughter of God' or 'she is Eve'" (2004: 68), not Beckett's student Elliseva Sayers from Trinity College, Dublin (Knowlson et al., 2007: 54). In other words, if Jeremy Parrott chose to look for the "truth" in Beckett's naming by enumerating — unfortunately, not explaining — possible autobiographical references, he should have done so consistently. If he saw Beckett as an active "encoder" of the names, he should have provided at least some evidence of author's competence in the Thai, Cantonese, Irish, and Slavic languages (Parrott, 2001: 249; Parrott, 2004: 108). Otherwise, it seems that Parrott is both the "decoder" and the "encoder" of Beckett's names whose only interest is to give any explanation of a name at any price — even if it contradicts Beckett aesthetics, common sense, and Parrott's own statements.

Jeremy Parrott's "filter" does not only fail in these instances, and the list of his blunders, inaccuracies, and groundless suppositions could be continued to several pages if it were our task to write a review of his onomasticon. The initial aim of this article is, however, to trace the evolution of the study of Beckett's naming practices, and it suffices to say that Parrott's chaotic work, though it definitely has its place in the history of the question, can hardly aspire to influence its development in a positive way. The thesis, from which Parrott draws material for his subsequent article (Parrott, 2003) and book (Parrott, 2004), gives several original and provocative interpretations of some names; its danger to the development of the study of names in Beckett is, however, serious. In his works, Parrott does not only ignore the tendencies that have appeared in this field of Beckett criticism for the last two decades, of which, judging by his overview (2001: 27–32), he was simply unaware, but he also sends it back to the very beginning. Returning the meaning, the "truth" and the author, Parrott goes further and further away from Samuel Beckett's texts and the name as such. By this he again denies the status of the study of names in Beckett as a separate field, making it just another unnecessary appendix to the investigation into Beckett

and his life. Thus, the fact that Parrott's thesis should end with the words from *Texts for Nothing*, "enough vile parrot I'll kill you" (ibid.: 413) is more than appropriate.

In 2008, many of the problems stated at the beginning of this article remained unsolved. Takeshi Kawashima's essay "'What Kind of Name is That?': Samuel Beckett's Strategy of Naming" (2008) attested to the same lack of continuity and independence that the study of names in Beckett's texts had always experienced. As many had done before him, Kawashima compared Beckett's and Joyce's systems of naming and — as many had been doing before him — ignored all the previous research undertaken and published in this area.

In 2010, many of the problems stated at the beginning of this article remain unsolved. First of all, most of the works written on Beckett's naming are still unread, their achievements are still unacknowledged and their shortcomings — uncriticized. The present little overview cannot compensate for the years of silence, for the absence of conscious dialogue, for the lack of interest, and for the general stagnation of thought that the study of Beckett's names has always experienced. Secondly, without a certain "tradition" and means for development, the works remain *there* but the study as a separate field of Beckett criticism still does not exist. It could be changed with the appearance of new research that would inscribe itself into the tradition and at the very same time produce an alternative to it by concentrating on the architecture of names set against Beckett's texts; a work that would not take preference of either names in fiction or names in drama, or enumerate interpretations of all the names, but would see them all fused to form a single entity as all Samuel Beckett's works, upon a closer look, can finally be seen to form one oeuvre. Such a work would accomplish what this article can never pretend to do — to give birth to the study of names and naming in Beckett.

## Notes

[1] The English version of this article was also published in a collection of essays *Samuel Beckett*, edited by Martin Esslin in 1965. Throughout this article, English quotations will be from this edition.

## Bibliography

Andonian, C.C. 1986. *Samuel Beckett: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co.

Baker, P. 1991. *Beckett's Bilingualism and a Possible Source for the Name of Moran in "Molloy."* Beckett International Foundation Archives, University of Reading Library, BAK MS 3683.

Bello, G. 1979. A Dictionary of Proper Names in Samuel Beckett's Works. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania.

Bentley, E. 1956. The Talent of Samuel Beckett. *New Republic*, 134: 20–21.

Busi, F. 1974a. Naming Day in No-Man's-Land: Samuel Beckett's Use of Names in *Waiting for Godot*. *Boston University Journal*, 22(1): 20–29.

Busi, F. 1974b. *Waiting for Godot*, A Modern *Don Quijote*? *Hispania*, 57: 876–85.

Busi, F. 1980. *The Transformations of Godot*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Butler, H.L. 1962. Balzac and Godeau, Beckett and Godot: A Curious Parallel. *Romance Notes*, III: 13–17.

Cohn, R. 1962. *Samuel Beckett. The Comic Gamut*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Cohn, R. 1973. *Back to Beckett*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Croussy, G. 1971. *Beckett*. Paris: Hachette.

Duckworth, C. 1977. Introduction. *En attendant Godot*. Samuel Beckett. London: Harrap, xvii–cxxxv.

Dukore, B. 1962. Gogo, Didi, and the Absent Godot. *Drama Survey*, 1: 301–07.

Ellis, J. 2007. Absence as Influence: Samuel Beckett and Paul Muldoon. *Beckett's Literary Legacies*. Ed. by M. Nixon & M. Feldman. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 40–57.

Feshbach, S. 1994. On Names in James Aloysius Augustine Joyce and Samuel Barclay Beckett. *Massachusetts Review*, 34(4): 593–615.

Friedman, M.J. 1970. Introduction. *Samuel Beckett Now*. Ed. by M.J. Friedman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3–30.

Hill, L. 1983. The Name, the Body, *The Unnamable*. *Oxford Literary Review*, 6(1): 52–67.

Hill, L. 1990. *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jacobsen, J. & Mueller, W.R. 1964. *The Testament of Samuel Beckett*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Kenner, H. 1959. The Cartesian Centaur. *Perspective*, XI: 132–41.

Kern, E. 1954–1955. Drama Stripped for Inaction: Beckett's *Godot*. *Yale French Studies*, 14: 41–47.

Knowlson, J. 1997. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury.

Knowlson, J. & Knowlson, E. eds. 2007. *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett: Uncollected Interviews with Samuel Beckett and Memories of Those Who Knew Him*. London: Bloomsbury.

Lavielle, É. 1970. *En attendant Godot de Beckett*. Paris: Hachette.

Leventhal, A.J. 1964. Le Héros de Beckett. *Lettres Nouvelles*, XII: 32–52.

Leventhal, A.J. 1964–1965. The Beckett Hero. *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, VII: 18–35.

Leventhal, A.J. 1965. The Beckett Hero. *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. by M. Esslin. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 37–51.

Levy, A. 1967. The Long Wait for Godot. *Casebook on "Waiting for Godot."* Ed. by R. Cohn. New York: Grove Press, 74–78.

Levitt, J. 1977. Names in Beckett's Theater: Irony and Mystification. *Literary Onomastics Studies*, 4: 49–67.

Mayoux, J.-J. 1957. Le Théâtre de Samuel Beckett. *Études Anglaises*, X: 350–66.

Muldoon, P. 2000. *To Ireland,* I. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Nan, M. 1979. Names in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. *Literary Onomastics Studies*, 6: 246–60.

Rhodes, S.A. 1963. From Godeau to Godot. *French Review*, 36: 260265.

Parrott, J. 2001. Change all the Names: A Critical Onomasticon of Characternyms in the Fiction of Samuel Beckett. Thesis, University of Reading.

Parrott, J. 2003. "Nothing Neatly Named": The Beckettian Aesthetic and Negative Theology. *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 13: 91–101.

Parrott, J. 2004. *Change all the Names: A Critical Onomasticon of Characternyms in the Works of Samuel Beckett*. Szeged: Kakapo Press.

Pronko, L.C. 1964. *Avant-Garde: The Experimental Theater in France*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Scott, N. 1965. *Samuel Beckett*. London: Bowes and Bowes.

Tritt, W. 1976. Statistics on Proper Names in *Murphy*. *Samuel Beckett: The Art of Rhetoric*. Ed. by E. Morot-Sir, H. Harper et al. Chapel Hill: Department of Romance Languages, University of North Carolina, 201–10.

Vaughan, M.F. 1980. Beckett's Naming of *Godot*. *Studia Neophilologica*, 52(1): 119–22.

## Notes on contributor

Tatyana Hramova is currently a doctoral student in English at the University of Reading. She is primarily interested in poetics, English literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, literary onomastics, and the use of names in cinema.

Correspondence to: Tatyana Hramova, Department of English and American Literature, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Reading, Whiteknights, Reading RG2 7HA, Berkshire, United Kingdom. Email: t.hramova@reading.ac.uk