

Where there is resonance

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The film may or may not contain reference to echoes, bones or Samuel Beckett, the disclaimer warns me, again, as I settle into my seventh sitting with the rough cut of *Echo's Bones*. It's a collectively made film by several young people who took part in a project of the same name—*Echo's Bones*—developed by artist Sarah Browne. I hang on their address to me, a member of a blurry, faceless audience. Even during my repetitious watching of the film's final cut, I'm still tripping over it. Reading the disclaimer over and over doesn't settle it down to such a point where I might eventually take the proposed ambiguity for granted. Instead, the repetition turns me the other way, and I find myself approaching Beckett through many aspects of the film's production. To begin with, it's difficult to have any typical narrative expectations satisfied by the film, as is the case with many of Beckett's works of fiction. As the film's action proceeds, you find yourself not so much watching a story develop as witnessing the characters' encounters with their social and sensory environments. In a beautiful scene two-thirds of the way through, Eunice is caught between Tara and Sophie who, flanking her, are talking emphatically 'about the climate group, again.' Eunice's attention falters and images of the horse she keeps flash into her mind: the quiet softness of brushing its hide; how hazy bands of light catch on the sawdust kicked up by its hooves in the stable. It's an incredibly moving moment in the film but almost entirely outside of any plot drive until she finds the moral in her momentary absence—the reason for this sensory resonance—and shares it with her peers. These swells in scenic narrative building echo the updrafts that many of Beckett's characters catch in moments of reverie, and they lift perceptual restrictions of present time action into narrative overtures that produce broader arcs of meaning for audiences. A coastal rock shelf, a sports hall, the

grounds of an old asylum are striking locations for a film shoot, but as they are captured away from their social contexts as the beach or the leisure centre, isolation lends the locations an ethereal quality, much like the restricted perceptual vantage points of several of Beckett's short character narratives. Place is made from the visual barebones of space, and in these dreamlike scenes Eunice, Sophie, Tara, Barry, John, and Bobby-Belacqua attempt to construct themselves as young adults focused on the elusive goal of fitting-in, imagining their lives against the overwhelming backdrop of climate crisis, but also as autistic people, strategising their positionality within each 'new territory' of sensory and social encounter.

The condition of a Beckettian character is never far away when the construction of an identity is at stake. '[F]or Beckett's personae, the realisation that they have no real self...leads them to think of their situations as *literally impossible*,' (1976, p.51) writes Beckett scholar John Pilling in his account of the existential timbre of characterisation in Beckett's work. This 'impossibility' of Beckett's characters echoes some of the very worst clinical representations of autistic selves made popular by psychologists in the 1980s—that autistic people fundamentally lacked a Theory of Mind, or ability to attribute subjective mental states to both themselves and those around them—but this 'impossibility' also chimes with popular descriptions of youth's existential crises, though I admit, such a thing as teenage angst seems pressurised beyond recognition by a proliferation of data and images of climate catastrophe. Like many young adults today, the voices of Beckett's texts decry an absence of narrative certainty against which they might plot their individual stories. 'Leave,' says the voice of Text Three from Beckett's nihilistically titled, *Texts for Nothing* (1967). 'I was going to say leave all that. What matter who's speaking, someone said what matter who's speaking,' (2010, p.85). Beckett's 'all that' I imagine to be exactly this: narrative certainty. A caution is issued from the perspective of a present time protagonist, a first-person narrator; readers are given fair warning from the very outset that narrative certainty is not possible. There's something so brazen and funny, facetious almost, on Beckett's part, in the deadpan resignation of

‘what matter who’s speaking.’ This is a text that wears its construction—the difficulty of it—on its sleeve, suggesting a textual persona who is able to hear the linguistic will of its author and foresee the expectations of a reader. It presents an echo chamber in which the persona senses the manner of its own construction but isn’t quite able to take charge of the narrative—it’s a perfect cosmic joke. As is the daily tragicomedy of maintaining a story of yourself for yourself, while passing as a different, more readily legible type of story for others. ‘There’s going to be a departure,’ the persona of Text Three tells us, ‘I’ll be there, I won’t miss it,’ they assure their readers, but then they turn: ‘it won’t be me, I’ll be here, I’ll say I’m far from here, it won’t be me, I won’t say anything, there’s going to be a story, someone’s going to try and tell a story,’ (ibid.). It’s easy to read an autistic rumination on passing in this—making yourself acceptably legible—and to see the correlates with characters in the *Echo’s Bones* film. ‘How do I pass? How do I pass?’ Barry’s inner monologue repeats in the indistinct sports hall, as he makes a metaphor from the basketball he’s bouncing. Barry’s rumination is a litany of anxieties on passing; passing the ball, his exams, and also social passing, which might be constructed from his perspective as a young, Black man. ‘No. Stop overthinking,’ he eventually instructs himself. This is echoed in turn by the character Sophie, as she sits nearby reading descriptions of a well-to-do woman’s behaviour in a novel. Passing cuts across social contexts. The outward projection of one’s inner identifications and how this works with and against markers of race, gender, class, and ability—both within and without the boundary of youth’s pressure to fit in—are felt by more than autistic communities. We needn’t be a neurodiverse audience to acknowledge our place in this quandary, we meet at the intersections. I wonder where Beckett’s personae might be if they just stopped overthinking, as Barry suggests. In stories more static and expected, I imagine. Unable to question themselves into existence, perhaps there would be only blank paper. But instead of such an absence, the dispersed ‘I’s of Beckett’s writing echo and ricochet around the page, covering multitudes of location and temporality within persona, character, narrator, writer,

author, even reader, inadvertently forming something as dynamic as a 'self' actually is.

Professor of English, Julia Miele Rodas, employs this word 'ricochet' in her comparative analysis of the clinical terms for how autistic people use language, as outlined in diagnostic literature, and the poetics of several literary experiments that she argues use similar linguistic effects. Focusing on the clinical term, echolalia—a supposedly 'meaningless' repetition of spoken words—Rodas proposes to replace the word with ricochet, in the hope of reframing autistic wordplay by centring the intentionality that echolalia precludes. Rodas draws together examples of skimming stones, rebounding munitions and implications of erratic or dangerous excess (2018, p.44) from the English colloquial usage since it entered the lexicon in the mid-eighteenth century, but her study of French idiomatic usage prior to the English adoption enables Rodas to foreground an earlier meaning of ricochet as an applied 'method' for anchoring seemingly random repetition (2018, p. 45)—something far more intentional than the empty resultant effects manifested by a repeated technique. In a French dictionary from the early seventeenth century, Rodas finds, *chanson du ricochet*, a phrase used to describe an endless tale or song in which one part 'contradicts, mars, or over-throws another,' (ibid.). It's in these poetic origins of ricochet, and the subsequent détournement of the word, that Rodas finds an important comparative tension with the naming and framing of autistic language. If echolalia names the vacant results of object relations—stone, water, bullet, wall—ricochet is the sensibility for rhetorical doubling found in narrative tradition.

Beckett's short story, *Echo's Bones*, has a unique position in his work as a narrative that 'contradicts, mars and overthrows' those immediately preceding it. It was a story Beckett didn't include in his manuscript submission, and one I'm sure he resented writing when encouraged to do so by his publisher in the run-up to printing, *More Pricks Than Kicks* in 1934. Chatto and Windus required a financial return on the publication, after all, 'short stories are chancey things, on which the library and the bookseller turn a

poached-egg eye,' as the press' publisher Charles Prentice wrote to Beckett in September 1933 (2014, p.111). Burdened with his publisher's economic drive and bizarre metaphors, I'm sure, Beckett struggled to write an additional story for the end of the collection, not least of all because the main characters were dead by the end of the preceding story. It's a difficult read that makes no bones about its narrative implausibility. I imagine much late-night facetiousness on Beckett's part while recycling material from an earlier rejected novel and its notebook (2014, p.x). 'People will shudder and be puzzled and confused,' Prentice wrote back in his rejection of the story some weeks after he received it, 'and they wouldn't be keen on analysing the shudder. I am certain that *'Echo's Bones'* would depress the sales very considerably,' (2014, p, 114). The manuscript for *More Pricks...* was sent to the printers without it. The abandoned short story was not published until posthumously in 2014, where in his foreword, the director of the Beckett International Foundation, Mark Nixon, sympathises with the original publisher's position: '*Echo's Bones* is a difficult, at times obscure story, uneven in tone and mood, and evasive in stating its business,' he writes (2014, p.xiii). While it might be 'brilliantly undisciplined', for Nixon the fact remains: 'its fragmentary nature, its incessant intertextual borrowings, the way it shifts between different literary styles and its allusive, wayward language, [doesn't] allow the story to coalesce into a unity,' (2014, p. xiii). Although I've argued for the ricochet—or the 'shudder' as Prentice might call it—in Beckett's writing to be understood as precisely that which forms a unity as dynamic as a self actually is, I do agree that the techniques described don't allow the story to coalesce. But self isn't story, it is story-ing, and technique alone doesn't ensure it's success.

While never explicitly framed as autobiography, much of Beckett's short fiction engages ideas of locating a self through the task of building a story's structure. In the short story *Echo's Bones*, this is made explicit by an undead, repurposed character trying to work out why he still exists, but in *Texts For Nothing* these ideas are presented as a kind of creative critique of literary form, which leads to philosophical questioning around the narrative certainty of

personhood. In an essay on the narrative theory of autobiography, Professors of Literature Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson claim that, 'theoretically speaking, both the storytelling and the self constituted by it are narrative constructions of identity,' (2005, p.357). The writerly processes of autobiography borrow heavily from fiction's toolbox and by addressing this, Smith and Watson lend us the means to understand the construction of 'self' in Beckett also. The 'I' of autobiography is 'neither unified nor stable,' they tell us, 'rather, it is split, fragmented, provisional, a sign with multiple referents,' (ibid.). As readers of the fragmented personae in *Texts For Nothing*, what we are offered is an account of narrative construction in the form of characterisation—the building of an acceptable story of self, a form of passing. 'Start by stirring,' the voice of Text Three advises itself, 'there must be a body...I'll say I'm a body, stirring back and forth, up and down, as required,' (2010, p.85), and from these paltry beginnings a story is born, difficultly; the ricochet of 'I's start to pass as a character. The voice goes on, for it must: 'With a cluther of limbs and organs, all that is needed to live again, to hold out a little time, I'll call that living, I'll say it's me, I'll get standing, I'll stop thinking, I'll be too busy, getting standing, staying standing, stirring about, holding out, getting to tomorrow...' (ibid.). I read these few lines in the copy I borrowed a lifetime ago and didn't return to its owner, and I wonder what of this description isn't the experience of gathering your 'self' in the morning, and heading out into the world as something more legible? It's an experience I've surely had all my life, but more recently, on an artist residency, when I was struggling to participate in the collective eating requirement, someone who was likewise managing their social anxiety joked about what it felt like to start each day. 'Load the Talk to People programme,' she announced in a deep robotic impression. 'But don't talk too much!' she followed, in a more concerned but equally performative tone. I bursted into laughter so loud and sudden that people must have thought I was attention-seeking, but by-Christ was it meant. The others at the table hadn't heard what was said—or they had, and didn't get it—but nevertheless we laughed ourselves silly. In retrospect, what had

been so funny, a shock almost, was the public resonance of our private experiences, which, in turn, were about being private in the public sphere. This rhetorical doubling of meaning produced a giddy, coded momentum toward the Holy state of crying-laughing.

I've discussed *Texts For Nothing* precisely for this reason: from the range of Beckett's writing, it's the short experimental works that resonate with me most. And in my experience, where there is resonance, there is reason. The narrative mode of *Texts...* registers closely with the fictionalising strategies of autobiography. "That's what it's like," I almost say when I read it. And that is what it's like when the self you're trying to narrativise disperses, and locks into an internal dialogue on how it is made and unmade by social contexts. I find a home when reading Beckett's character constructions. They are resonant sites in which to review my own building practices, in like-minded company. Perhaps this is why I never returned the copy of *Texts...* to its owner? 'Resonance is a crippling feeling,' writes Professor of English and Disability Studies, M. Remi Yergeau. 'In autistic communities, this gut feeling—this "lust born of recognition"—is at times called *A-dar* or *aut-dar*, terms that are clever plays on *gaydar*. We encounter one another, and we know,' (2018, p.139). I guess Beckett's been on my a-dar since before I knew I had one.

Resonance has meaning for autistic language in the metaphorical echoes made possible by visual or structural likenesses, but it has meaning also in terms of acoustic reverberations. In hir 2007 video, *In My Language*, the late autistic blogger and activist, Mel Baggs offers audiences 'a strong statement on the existence and value of many different kinds of thinking and interaction' (2007, 00:07:12) specifically what sie refers to as language that 'is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret' (00:03:35). The first three minutes of the eight minute video is a montage of Baggs' sensory interaction with hir environment, and the remainder is a discussion of the implications delivered through the machine voice of hir assisted communication device and accompanying subtitles. According to reductive and restrictive clinical descriptions, sie might not be

considered 'verbal' but on the contrary: sie sings. Baggs shapes a note into a vocal drone that slides up and down a musical scale, rhythmically setting this to sequences of hir interaction with objects; rattling wires off metal things, strumming fingertips along plastic ridges, flapping little strips of paper in the daylight, actioning a wrist joint to explore the shape of metal door knob. The audio-visual capacities of video and the editorial logic of montage allows Baggs to demonstrate—not just represent—what hir language is and how it's based on sensorially vibing with hir environment: 'I can sing along with is around me' sie informs us (00:05:02).

What song is as a mode of autistic language is a rich thought-space to spend time in and would require a different, longer, period of essaying, elsewhere. Save to say, a song's mnemonic function is well established in our everyday experiences, from nursery rhymes to idly humming refrains we half-heard on the TV or radio. Song's relationship to storytelling is historically wed—long before you and I were twinkles in writing's eye—in an oral epoch when narratives were, for better or worse, more mutable and less fixed. As a communicative method, song is so imminent that we embrace rather than denounce affected emotion when singing our favourite lines, for the way we embody lyric personae. We understand what is taking place when we perform emotion out of context like this, or rather song is, itself, the context for emotions. If I ever stop singing the words, 'Senses don't fail me now'—a line from the *Echo's Bones* film soundtrack—when I'm trying to remember where I've put something, it'll be a minor miracle (thanks, Fionn!). Baggs claims song as part of hir communicative repertoire, hir language. It's put to use as a way of communicating to hir film's audience, in much the same way that the audio production of *Echo's Bones* helps to form the film's narrative. It produces a non-symbolic, supplementary set of relations, whereby musical phrases resonate in the short-term memory of our viewership. Whether they are lyric repetitions or sonic refrains, the 'againness' of the repetition demonstrates to us a kind of knowledge, a familiarity we are surprised to alight on. 'Ah yes,' we say to ourselves when the whispered scat creeps back in—if only I could transcribe it!

Rhythmic patterning is the core editorial method that builds narrative meaning in the *Echo's Bones* film. If we reconsider Eunice's private aside, remembering her horse, it's clear that the language of this encounter is made possible by the repetition of the editorial cut; it gives us something like a blink. Returns to atmospheric, slower motions when depicting the horse's stable, evokes a middle-distance we might stare into ourselves. Repeating this, blinking it out, allows us to witness how Eunice returns to her private world—a 'how' that is otherwise not spoken of. Other characters' actions such as cycling, bird-watching, reading, clicking fingers, walking a line, are spliced with saturated images of their sensory stimulations. Vignetted frames show us the vivid yellow of wild flowers and lichens, and the peculiar eddying of a purple ball is seen caught in a rocky inlet. These, along with amplified sounds, do more than offer symbolic interplay. They aren't poor versions that signal something else referred to, like the foley sound of a creaking floorboard on the radio might be, they demonstrate the sensory sensitivities themselves, their lull and repulsion. Through an editorial poetic that favours a paratactic method for building narrative, we are brought close to what Baggs might have called a non-symbolic autistic language. 'This and this' the film seems to say, 'this and this, in relation to this and this.' It's through such additive logic that the film's narrative construction work happens, a method that feels close to the characterisation of Text Three's persona in Beckett's, *Texts For Nothing*.

However, in the *Echo's Bones* film, the turning of space into place is cultivated by more than montage and memory-inducing audio-visual repetitions. The application of the participants' experiential knowledge and their engagement in the concentric circles of team-like film production, is also a method of place-making. Song's affective power is brought into play by those involved in the writing and recording of the soundtrack, the way the actors' laughter performs a felt reality draws down on years of experiencing that magic happen, the ricochets of internal dialogue are made palpable by the skill of scriptwriters, and more. Aspects of the *Echo's Bones* film resonate with Beckett's works without doubt,

but the poetry the film generates in the context of neurodiversity is perhaps made possible only by the particularity of filmmaking's disparate yet collaborative form of collectivity. Perhaps this form of social structuring might too be called an autism poetic, alongside the linguistic tendencies argued for elsewhere? Finding forms of collectivity that incorporate those of us who find social cohesion difficult is an urgent necessity for living a meaningful life. 'Without collaboration, we all die,' Tara exclaims toward the end of the film. Strictly speaking, she's talking about 'the climate group again' and is trying to assuage Sophie's hard-line individualism. To take the comment out of context delivers it as blunt blow to end an essay, but perhaps I mean to be blunt, with myself as much as anyone else. Survival is a collaborative process. Living a meaningful life might be one too.

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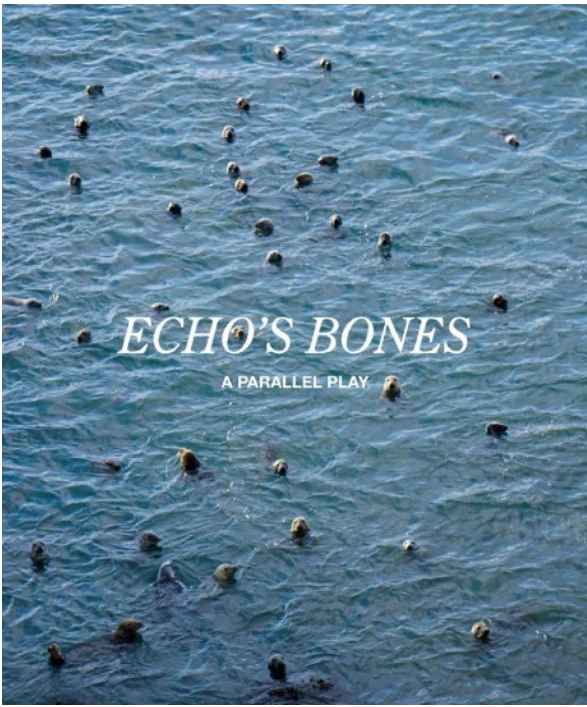
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Description

Echo's Bones is a public art project led by Sarah Browne with autistic young people in North County Dublin. It borrows its title from an unpublished story by Samuel Beckett set in that landscape, populated by unusual characters

and wildlife, where an old asylum building meets the coastline.

This book presents a new play devised and filmed with the young people in the same setting as the original story, nearly a century later.

Autism is not the topic of the project but a way of sensing the world and speculating about a shared future together. This book features original artwork, a collection of research material from the film production, and newly-commissioned fiction and non-fiction essays by award-winning writers Blindboyboatclub, Hamja Ahsan and Roy Claire Potter. Designed by Peter Maybury.

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