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Butterworth's poetics of absence

Elisabeth Angel-Perez

Jez Butterworth believes in ghosts. The distinctive quality of a number of his plays – *The Night Heron*, *The Winterling* and, particularly, *The River* – precisely hinges around the fusion of naturalism and of the uncanny in a way that both recalls and reorients Pinter's heritage towards more mythical ends. Whereas the sense of 'menace' is undoubtedly the soil on which they thrive, Butterworth's characters strive to escape the restrictions of their individual existences and connect with the 'larger than life'¹ patterns of mythical heroes.

Butterworth creates characters that gain a kind of haunting depth as they exist both in our time frame and in that of a wider memorial temporality. He does so in order to address the fundamental question of theatre: how to make the invisible, visible, or in Peter Brook's words, how to create a 'Theatre of the-Invisible-made-Visible'². One of the first missions of the theatre is to allow a space where the voice of the dead can be heard. This is why Butterworth writes for the stage; his theatrical space is that which 'welcomes the ghost', in accordance with Antoine Vitez's vision of the theatre³. This task – which recalls the central premise of *Hamlet* and its revenant – is nowhere more apparent than in Butterworth's *The River* (2012), which takes its rightful place among the different attempts to shape out absence in modern British drama: alongside Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982) with its surrealistic first act where the ghosts of famous women – real or legendary – meet, Edward Bond's plays, from *Early Morning* (1968) through *Lear* (1971) and *The War Plays* (1985) and all the way to *At the Inland Sea* (1995), solicit the presences of ghosts, at times grotesque, at times lyrical or tragic. Harold Pinter has continuously been concerned by what 'returns'. Ever since *The Room* (1960), in which a ghost emerging from the past triggers off the supernatural denouement of the play, Pinter has

developed a spectral dramaturgy, culminating with *Moonlight* (1993), in which Bridget's absence haunts the stage, and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), where Rebecca is literally possessed by the ghosts of these mothers whose babies were torn away from them during the Second World War. Furthermore, Butterworth's drama reflects and extends this ongoing concern on the contemporary stage: Martin Crimp's central yet spectral and invisible figure of Anne in *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), Sarah Kane's living ghost(s) in *Blasted* (1995), *Cleansed* (1998), *Crave* (1998) and *4:48 Psychosis* (2000) and Debbie Tucker Green's post-mortem voice in *random* (2008) constitute the theatrical environment that enfolds *The River*.

Butterworth has been sometimes criticized for being too 'strongly influenced by Pinter's language and style', or even dismissed for being a mere 'stylist, lacking in content'⁴. However, with *The River*, Butterworth unfurls a poetic form and quality of drama, capturing absence as *absense* (abstraction of sense, removal of meaning), and transcending the tragicomic treatment of the same theme in some of his earlier plays, establishing his own distinctive 'spectropoetics'⁵ for the stage.

Uncanny disruptions: from the *Unheimlich* to the mythical, via Gothic Arcadia

A number of Butterworth's plays take place in a realistically delineated English countryside. *The River* exemplifies this; and yet the text is replete with uncanny rufflings and disruptions of the naturalistic surface. The action is situated in an apparently true-to-life cabin above the river, complete with 'Table. Chairs. Stove. Sink. Spiders' (R7); and the naturalistic setting is reinforced by the presence of Danny, the poacher equipped with 'Monster Munch': his strategic use of a popular form of junk food desecrates the art of fishing, according to The Man, but the reference to this familiar brand weaves a strong link between that world and ours. The Man's

inventory of fishing equipment is as realistically detailed as possible, and the cooking scene may evoke bucolic associations of “kitchen sink drama”. However, the location, remote and aloof, conjures up a pastoral dimension, which can be identified in other plays by Butterworth such as *The Night Heron* or *The Winterling*, and which severs the place from our contemporary space and time (our chronotopes⁶) and allows the past to resurrect: as The Woman startlingly remarks ‘I’ve done it before’ (R25).

The River’s construction of a pastoral place on the stage provides a clear opposition to the bustling city, and in this it echoes Martin Crimp’s play *The Country* (2000). Yet, whereas Crimp’s play resembles a city comedy transplanted in a rural setting (rurality seldom penetrating the characters’ city-shaped language), Butterworth explores the typicality of the rural world, less often depicted in the predominantly city-based contemporary drama of our globalized era. Butterworth’s dramatic spaces of predilection are *ex-centric* places: *Jerusalem* constitutes the paragon of recurrent dramatic impulse to bring the margins to the centre (a trope even discernible, to some extent, in the actions which problematize the associations of the settings of the non-rural plays: *Mojo*’s setting in commercial Soho, and *Parlour Song*’s suburbia). *The Night Heron* (2002), whose title apparently invites us to expect a renewed pastorality, has much to do with gardens. The play starts with a spoken evocation of the garden established ‘eastward in Eden’ (105), suggesting that the immediately presented old ramshackle timber shed in the Fens is the downgraded avatar of this designated place that even the Cambridge colleges gardens have not been able to maintain:

NEDDY: Fellow’s garden caught the frost. Lost them rose bushes to it.

GRIFFIN: I heard that.

NEDDY: And the quince tree died. (124-5)

Wattmore and Griffin occasionally appear more realistically delineated offsprings of Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon in their dysfunctional relationship: like Estragon, Wattmore gets beaten up whenever he goes out; and he ends up carrying through the suicidal resolve which Beckett's tramps leave undone. In other ways, they seem to think of themselves as God's tramps, and they actively try to work their way out of material contingency through "tending their own garden" made of poetry, desolation, rabbits and the birds whose presence attracts birdwatchers from all corners of the world. A political metaphor for the state of England, the play conjures up a pastoral doomed to decadence (as is all pastorality). Arcadia can only be deemed idyllic by contrast with what is not, and is already haunted by the inevitable perspective of decadence, as iconically recalled by Nicolas Poussin's two paintings both entitled 'Et in Arcadia Ego', in which the presence of death is found, engraved.

Similar adulterated paradises are present in most of Butterworth's plays. The lyrical bucolic impression and flavour of the title *The Winterling* is bathetically undercut for the newcomers by West: 'You fall asleep out here, something creeps up and eats you' (205); much anticipating 'this dark place' that England has become in *Jerusalem* (J49). Similarly in *The River*, the landscape acquires a symbolic dimension and immediately exudes a whiff of paradise lost. Perennial and seemingly unchanged, the archaic nature of the place connects The Man with his ancestors in the woods, and promises an escape from the modern world and a proximity with nature, celebrating a past prelapsarian age. Yet the exposition of this potentially blissful experience turns into a necessarily autistic pleasure. The romantic sunset watching is turned into a clichéd literary construct, narrated in the past tense by The Woman - 'That was a magical moment. 'That evening at the cabin. When they watched the sun set' (R8) - which they never achieve: The Man shuns the opportunity, and The Woman declines the invitation to go

down to the river to share The Man's excitement. Their stichomythic dialogue (J9) reads like two fragmented monologues; failure contaminates the text as corroborated by the unlucky poetry reading experience (R14-15).

Furthermore, this rural "paradise" is soon submitted to a number of gothic assaults. The cabin is not unlike that in Daphne du Maurier's/Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, and the picture of the woman whose face has been scratched out (R35) confirms this, while appealing to imaginative scenarios shaped by such universal tales as *Beauty and the Beast* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The onstage presence of a 'pale' red-eyed woman (R17) prefigures the diaphanous and mute riverside figure of the unblinking woman literally appearing in 'still' air (R24). The village graveyard holds a Dickensian tomb where all the young children of a Copperfield-like family are buried (R23); this leads to The Man's premonition of becoming a 'ghost' (R40), apparently realized to some extent when The Other Woman recalls how his 'skin went cold' and his 'breath went sour' (R41). The gothic is buttressed by the uncanny (the Freudian '*Unheimlich*').

Furthermore: the play discloses the presence of voices with no "bodies" immediately attached to them: the opening singing voice, but also the 'Woman's Voice' (R16) convey the idea that voice is made to exist as a character of its own. Technically, these vocal moments permit the changeover between the two women, but they suggest more. Similarly, the play openly discusses the spectral power of photography and (over)pedagogically discusses what precisely is at stake in the play ('... you'll see this picture. And you'll carry it to the window. The sun will be setting. And you'll think when did this happen? Was it Summer? Who is that woman?', R39: a series of questions which that can be asked by the spectator of the play itself). The disquieting atmosphere is also reinforced by the sudden alienation of the familiar, expressed by the fraught, sceptical and menacing insistence on such words as 'real' or 'really' (R28).

Eventually, the spectator becomes increasingly aware of the apparently hermetically divided phonetic spaces ('I didn't hear you. Did you hear me?', R17), which turn *The Woman and The Other Woman* not only into modern-day Persephones, brought out into light in turn, but also into solipsistic talkers – *per-se-phones*. The de-realisation of the drama entailed by the pervading presence of the uncanny allows the characters to be invested with archetypal significance, developed out of their realistic frame and into a “larger than life” pattern.

Butterworth's mythical method: an orphic play

Indeed, Butterworth's referential frame is always “larger than life”: *Jerusalem* evokes the national foundation myth of St George and the dragon and boasts a character with the romantic name of Byron; the action of *The Night Heron* takes place under the judging gaze of the Lord, manifested onstage thanks to the ‘*giant frieze depicting Christ and the Saints*’ photocopied onto many sheets of paper and ‘*pinned together with drawing pins*’ (105), parodying the nailing down of Jesus on the cross. *The River* evokes Orpheus vainly and repeatedly trying to bring his Euridyce back to life; the river of the setting suggests the mythical Lethe, separating the Quick from the Dead, or in other mythologies, the fantastic streams peopled by water sprites who mysteriously appear and vanish at once.

The Man's very private mythology becomes increasingly superimposed with mythic imagery associated with Jung's idea of a collective unconscious (a psychological repository of universal symbols or archetypes, the existence of which is fundamental to Jungian analysis). Just as Tennessee Williams sought to identify a ‘great vocabulary of images’⁷ beneath specifically American surface details, Butterworth connects the very English identity of his Man to a universal collective quest. In one interview, Butterworth claims a sense that somehow

words have a life of their own: ‘you’re waiting for [words] to show up... I know, I absolutely know for a fact, it doesn’t come from you’⁸; and although he has not explicitly mentioned an interest in myths, it seems that all his plays can be described as somehow shaped by his own personal ‘mythical method’ (to use a term of T.S. Eliot’s).

For all the naturalistic details it convokes, *The River* may paradoxically be seen as a play taking place inside The Man’s head, expressing what Butterworth identifies in the same interview as a ‘sense of loss’. The landscape – the cabin and the topography of the place – becomes a very Freudian mindscape and gives shape to a ‘mental drama’, in the terms of Martin Crimp (‘the dramatic space is a *mental* space, not a physical one’⁹). The cabin and its wilderness might also be read as an expressionistic translation of The Man’s most secret garden, represented concentrically (or *mis en abyme*) by the well preserved stone. Only by entering this world, his world, is one allowed to open a breach in The Man’s ‘totality’: the spectator is allowed inside, just like the two Women, and eventually dismissed, just as they are: a new audience being welcomed to the space everyday (the much discussed difficulty which people had in obtaining tickets for the London premiere production is salient here, transposing the privilege of being an ‘insider’ from the diegesis of the play to the ‘real world’¹⁰). The Orphic theme of *The River* enables Butterworth to unfurl a poetics of loss.

Spectropoetics

If Butterworth’s plays very seldom question the traditional forms of drama (all of his plays have a story, characters and a definite structure), *The River* stands out as a formal experimentation on the theme of absence. In ways which may recall Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on her Life*, *The River* brings together The Man and a multiple or serigraphic Woman (The Woman, The Other

Woman, Another Woman) whose unstable identity deprives the play of a closure, and maintains the possibility that the haunting protocol of the quest may start all over again. Traumatic in its formal dedication (to Jez Butterworth's only recently deceased sister), *The River* is traumatic in its poetics: it entirely revolves around the agape wound caused by absence and the impossibility of filling in the hole (trauma means 'wound' and shares the same etymology as '*trouée*', the French for 'hole', 'gap' or 'breach'). Whereas, in *4.48 Psychosis*, Kane dismembers the feminine subject by unnamng her and making her vanish right there in the *hic et nunc* of the page ('watch me vanish ...'), and Crimp while narrating her refuses Anne any kind of access onto the stage in *Attempts on her Life* (calling her 'an absence of character'), Butterworth clones the woman and, doing so, erases her/their intrinsic identity, not unlike Churchill's demultiplication of the son in *A Number* (2002).

Serigraphy

However, in *The River*, none of the versions of the Woman are true: what inexplicably remains is vacuity, the absence left by the departure of the dear one. Paradoxically and defying the ontological value ordinarily attributed to the stage (according to Berkeley's assertion that 'to be is to be perceived'), the only true woman seems to be the one whom we never have the chance to see onstage: the 'woman, standing by the water' who only exists in The Woman's narrative (R24).

The multiplication of the Women, first through an alternation between The Woman and The Other Woman which remains unremarked by The Man, then through the arrival of Another Woman starting it all over again, reads as the theatrical equivalent of serigraphic art. Through dramatic irony, the spectator is aware of the difference between at least two of the three women.

The original cast involved very different actresses (Miranda Raison as The Woman, Laura Donnelly as The Other Woman and Gillian Saker as Another Woman, in Ian Rickson's production at the Royal Court in 2012). The Man is blind, or "plays blind", to the change of partners and the serialization of the women therefore is all the more blatant. When the third Woman enters, taking the play back to its first catastrophe or *peripeteia* (The Man losing sight of a woman by the river), the spectator / reader is well aware that she will not be more successful in being 'the One' than the other two. The iterative structure that anchors the play in an absurdist Sisyphus-like circularity of failure displays simultaneously the incapacity to renounce the quest and the knowledge of its failure. The three women (and more, we suppose, if the play were to extend) bring the play close to other forms of serigraphic art: Warhol's pioneering pieces, but also more recently Francis Alÿs and his installation *Fabiola*¹¹. The multiplication of the presence oxymoronically points simultaneously to the exhaustion of the presence and to the impossibility of its dismissal. Because of the iterative structure and of the interchangeability of the women, the woman, for being too present, too 'numerous', is denied her singularity; although over-present, hauntingly, insistently present, she is absented: her substance is hollowed out. As in the self-conscious and deliberately clichéd repetitiveness of serigraphic art, the character loses his/her distinctive 'aura'. Walter Benjamin writes that 'that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art'¹²; the same can be said of the superimposition of these three women in the play: *The River* strikes us as a play more about the image of a woman than about a/the woman herself. The iterative structure allows Butterworth to explore the failing-yet-triumphant nature of the image in a way that comes very close to photography: the image/the idea of the woman remains, both as a sign of loss and as a confirmation of immortality, a paradox very beautifully epitomized by Derrida's concept of '*demeure*' as developed in his eponymous book: '*demeure*' as in 'to remain' and as

in an ‘abode’ or a ‘dwelling’, but also as in the negation of what dies (‘de-meurt’ from ‘de-mourir’ as ‘to un-die’).¹³

The iterative structure and the unobtrusive replacement of one woman by the next, in *The Man’s eyes* at least, show the persistence of the idea of *The Woman*, in spite of the death of the woman herself. Butterworth very movingly succeeds in creating an image utterly trapped in the double bind of simultaneous presence and loss. Through the interchangeability of the feminine figures, the play somehow suspends time and reconciles death and life: linear time is collapsed into a complex memorial temporality as the female characters gain a haunting presence. The presence of loss is therefore maintained throughout the play’s scenes which focus the attention on a series of life’s celebrated simplicities (flirting, cooking, eating, drying one’s hair) in a mode reminiscent of photography and of the ‘this-was’ (‘ça a été’) explored by Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida* (1980)¹⁴. Serigraphy conjures up the ghost: the image, both alive and obsolete as soon as materialized, continuously reappears and becomes a witness to its own spectralization.

Spectrality

Spectrality is associated, oxymoronicly, with playfulness – the presumption that ghosts do not exist, only children believe they do – and with morbidity: constantly reminding us that, as suggested by Maurice Blanchot’s words, a work of art can only be the trace of what has been lived’ (‘du vécu, l’oeuvre ne peut être que la trace’)¹⁵. Spectrality is what remains, what persists: memory, ash (‘*The call of ash*’, Derrida writes in *Cinders*¹⁶). Spectrality therefore conjures up absence, void, bereavement and turns them into a visibility.

This visibility is precisely what Butterworth is interested in in *The River*; and this is the

reason why he writes for the stage and not in another medium: spectrality shares the same root as ‘spectacle’ (they both come from the Latin verb ‘*specio*’, meaning ‘to look’ and thrive on the ideas of the ‘simulacrum’ and ‘spectrum’). What is particularly striking in *The River* is the way that Butterworth thematizes what constitutes the intrinsic nature of art and of theatre: ‘a necessity to imagine the invisible, therefore to situate it in time and space, to conceive of places, forms, volumes and bodies precisely where they should have been excluded’¹⁷. This reflection by Georges Didi-Huberman evokes what we might call the ‘spectral temptation’ of art. Figuring out the absent body, sculpting absence, finding signs to express what cannot be represented: this is what contemporary art and contemporary theatre have been attempting for the past decades. Theatre is a ventriloquist art and the process of spectralization is inscribed in the very principle of embodiment of a character by an actor (the fleshing out and voicing out of a role on the stage foregrounds the Derridian concept of ‘*differance*’¹⁸). When the actor-enunciator says ‘I’, a multilayered process of plural identity opens up, inhabited (or haunted?) by the presences of the author, the actor and the character. Spectrality is therefore one of the essential, fundamental protocols of the theatrical genre that constantly oscillates between showing and hiding, recalling Peter Brook’s definition of a ‘holy theatre’ as the ‘Theatre of the-Invisible-made-Visible’.

In the wake of Beckett’s *Ghost Trio* and Sarah Kane’s *Crave* (staged by Thomas Ostermeier on a décor of tombstones at the Schaubühne in 2000 and at the Théâtre de la Colline in Paris, one year later), Butterworth, with *The River*, embarks on a similar quest of producing **into** the visible what is not, of causing absence to come to light: an epiphany of absence. Whether pointing to the intimate (loss, bereavement) or the historical (the great tragedies of the 20th century), the ghost is, in Freud’s words, ‘what remains un-understood and therefore inevitably reappears’, ‘unled’¹⁹. The vocation of theatre consists of digging out, exhuming what lies beneath the surface, to find a visuality for that which shuns, or is denied,

representation; it deals in transcending loss, resurrecting the dead, despite ontological (and perhaps ethical) aporia, and offers the prospect of a miraculous incarnation (if you awake your faith). Butterworth's *The River* does just that: compulsively.

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¹ Tennessee Williams *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*. Ed. Albert J. Devlin. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986, p. 240.

² Peter Brook. *The Empty Space*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, p. 47.

³ Antoine Vitez. « Incarner les fantômes », an interview with A. Vitez, *Journal de Chaillot* 10 février 1983, qtd. by Monique Borie « le théâtre à l'épreuve de l'invisible », in Muriel Gagnebin, dir., *L'Ombre de l'image. De la falsification à l'infigurable*. Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2002, p. 222.

⁴ Vera Gottlieb's "Lukewarm Britannia" in *Theatre in a Cool Climate*, Vera Gottlieb and Colin Chambers, eds. Oxford: Amber Lane, 1999, p. 211.

⁵ I borrow the word from Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993), London: Routledge, 1994, p. 56.

⁶ A chronotope is the materialization of time in space, a symbolic monument to a community, a force operating to shape its members' images of themselves Bakhtin, M., "Aesthetics and theory of the Novel". *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981:84);..

⁷ See Agnes Roche-Lajta, "Dionysus, Orpheus and the Androgyn: Myth in *A Streetcar Named Desire*", *Etudes Anglaises* 1 (2011): 58-73. .

⁸ Video of an interview with Jez Butterworth accessible at <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/video/2011/nov/02/jez-butterworth-jerusalem-video-interview>, accessed on 14 January 2013.

⁹ Martin Crimp in Ensemble Modern Newsletter No. 23 - 10/2006.

¹⁰ Michael Billington, The Guardian, Saturday 27/10/2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/27/the-river-jez-butterworth-review> accessed 01/02/2014

¹¹ National Portrait Gallery, 2009.

¹² W. Benjamin (1936, 1968) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in W. Benjamin and H. Arendt eds., *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, p. 219-253., 223.

¹³ Jacques Derrida. *Demeure, Maurice Blanchot* (1998)/ Blanchot, Maurice, *The Instant of My Death*; and Derrida, Jacques, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.

¹⁴ R. Barthes (1980) *Camera Lucida: Reflexions on Photography.*, trans. Richard Howard. New York : Hill and Wang, 1981.

¹⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace Littéraire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1978, p. 105./ *The Space of Literature*, trans. A. Smock, University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, (1987) *Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher, University of Nebraska P, 1991, p. 9.

¹⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Génie du non-lieu*, Paris, Minuit, 2001, p. 225.

¹⁸ "Difference" both as in to differ and as in to defer and postpone. The concept first appears in Derrida's *Writing and Difference*, 1978, trans. A. Bass, London and New York: Routledge, p. 75.

¹⁹ « Phobia in a 5 year old Boy » (Little Hans). Two Cases histories, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, 1909, The Hogarth Press, 1957, vol. 10, p. 122.