

BECKETT AND CARROLL – A VIOLENT DENIAL OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

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In this paper, I investigate the relationships between narrative, knowledge and personal identity.

I take Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass". The basic questions addressed here can be formulated in this way:

How might narrative be defended as a necessary condition for constructing personal identity and how Beckett and Carroll violently deny this to their personages, undermining the basis on which it is built: bodily continuity, language, memory and the spatio-temporal continuity.

Carroll's works point to some of the features that characterise modern art and Postmodern critical discourse. An examination of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" shows striking similarities to Beckett's plays, lending credence to the premise that Carroll prefigures modern drama, especially in the guise of the Theatre of the Absurd and provides fertile ground for postmodern discourse. In the subversion of some traditional principles of theatrical aesthetics laid down by Aristotle, he was to present what most have considered to be the grim nature of man with a radically new notion of setting, time, action, language, dialogue and plot. Man is seen as disintegrated physically and psychically, and his society presented as increasingly deconstructing and irrecoverably fragmented. This absurd image of man is not unconnected to Carroll's philosophy of nonsense which significantly engages questions of life and existence.

The quest for meaning becomes the greatest issue of the two books not only for Alice in relation to the characters she encounters in her adventures. Beckett was to echo the same question about possible meanings in his works. The Duchess, the Hatter,

the Queen of Hearts, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, Humpty Dumpty, the Knight in Carroll's stories prefigure Beckett's treatment of personages. They either have a physical or psychological deficiency, or both. Carroll's portrayal of these character's physio-psychical deficiencies interestingly points to the way Beckett reduces humans to irrational pathetic figures in his plays. For example "The Mad Tea-Party" and its illogical and non-constructive dialogue foreshadows a typical Beckettian atmosphere of purposelessness and meaninglessness. Tweedledee and Tweedledum are not far from tramps and prefigure their modern counterparts Estragon and Vladimir or Clov and Hamm. Their verbal exchange only points to the difficulty of codifying possible meanings and they all seem to have no society, no history, no occupation, no real personality. Humpty Dumpty could be a precursor of many Beckett's characters in plays and novels, that live only through language.

Generally speaking, the problem of personal identity in Carroll's and Beckett's works is pursued through a gradual elimination of all referential points of personal identity (names, bodily continuity, memory and language).

The name of a personage not only creates a locus around which characterization and referential descriptions actually take place, but also guarantees the continuity and self-sameness of his identity over time. As Merleau-Ponty notes in "Phenomenology of Perception", we cannot conceive of an object or idea that comes into the world without words, because when one attaches a first name of an individual person, one calls forth a subject into the world. Among these aspects, instability of names is primarily a challenging one, because it essentially puts into question the persistence of personal identity. In "Waiting for Godot" Vladimir is also called "Didi" or, in one bizarre moment "Albert" and Estragon is also called "Gogo", and in one odd moment "Adam". We could remember the episode in which Alice is not sure if her name is Alice or not. "I'm sure I'm not Ada, "she said...and I'm sure I can't be Mabel, for I know all sorts of things, and she, oh, she knows such a very little! Besides, SHE'S she, and I'm I, and...oh... dear, how puzzling it all is! I'll try if I know all the things I used to know...London is the capital of Paris, and Paris is the capital of Rome, and Rome...no, THAT'S all wrong... I must have been changed for Mabel!... No, I've made up my mind about it; if I'm Mabel, I'll stay down here! It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying: "Come up again,

dear!" I shall only look up and say: "Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else."¹

Alice's need to be identified externally is directly related to power and act of naming. Alice bends to the will of a name-giver. She is willing to accept any name, that is not "Mabel". The White Rabbit mistakenly orders her, and not his servant, on an errand and her acceptance confirms, that the name giver exercises power over her. Identity is given by the other and naming is the most powerful example of that. We see, that Alice's sense of identity here is dependent on an authority figure by confirming her name. "We read in this passage then the separation of identity from itself, with Alice coming to occupy the liminal space between identity and non-identity, a liminality which always becomes another troublesome space, rather than setting into an identity, however undesired".²

Many of character's name in Beckett's plays and novels are later changed, a few are renamed a second time. The instability of proper names in runs opposite to our intuitional belief that proper names refer naturally to persisting entities through time. No doubt, this destabilization not only renders the personal identity unfixed and floating, but also reveals the failure of the act of name giving to denote the enduring identity of a character. By playing with proper names, the narrators disassociate sign from signified, creating a distance between word and object that cannot be traversed. At one moment names constitute a knowable existence, a distinct identity; at the very next, they find themselves subordinate to a condition of anonymity, to which they owe their existence. Alice's encounter with the Gnat shows that proper and general names are undifferentiated. Here Alice offers to tell the Gnat the names of some of the insects where she comes from, to which the Gnat replies:

"Of course they answer to their names?"

"I never knew them do it."

"What's the use of their having names," the Gnat said, "if they won't answer to them?"

"No use of them..." , said Alice.³

¹Carroll, Lewis (1898): *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Macmillan. 22

² Sutherland, Robert (1970): *Language and Lewis Carroll*. Paris: Mouton. 59

³ Carroll, Lewis (1906): *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. New York: Macmillan. 55

The discussion continues in the same way. In a forgetting of his name, the Beckettian personages and Alice are disoriented not only in the world, but also, more intricately, in himself. Submerged in a state of oblivion, he temporally loses his self-referential point, that is, reflective awareness of his own name.

The instability of proper names is intrinsically related to bodily decrepitude. According to Merleau-Ponty, the human person is composed of “flesh”, which “is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. He refers to the flesh as “a general thing, midway between spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being”.⁴ Flesh is first of all a way of existing within the world as a body, but it is also that which allows perception and using of language. If a proper name refers to an embodied being, it is also evidently a fact that a loss of the perception of the bodily orientation in the world may lead to a destabilization of the proper name, which becomes, then, false, replaceable, or an assumed one. With the deterioration of the body as an intermediary between consciousness and the world, self loses its sense of separation, difference, and uniqueness.

It is often the case, in Carroll's fiction, that the character transform themselves-successively becoming other, if not literally, at least in their dispositions. If one comes to conceive of oneself as constantly changing, the notion of existence is weakened and cannot be grasped easily.

“I wonder if i've been changed in the night? –asks herself Alice.

Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is: "Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!"⁵

In that sense, there is in one's perception of one's surroundings, an alienation of one- self, a loss-one has to give away something in order to engage with this "otherness" that the world represents.

“Alice looked down at her bands, and was surprised to see she had put on one of the Rabbit`s little white kid gloves while she was talking. "How can I have done that? I must

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, M.(1962): *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Smith, C. New York: The Humanities Press.139

⁵ Carroll, Lewis (1898): *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Macmillan. 21

be growing small again." She got up and went to the table to measure herself by it, and found that, as nearly as she could guess, she was now about two feet high, and was going on shrinking rapidly: she soon found out that the cause of this was the fan she was holding, and she dropped it hastily just in time to save herself from shrinking away altogether. "That was a narrow escape!" said Alice, a good deal frightened at the sudden change, but very glad to find herself still in existence".⁶

When Pozzo and Lucky return the second day. Pozzo is blind, seemingly powerless, and has no idea that he has ever met Estragon or Vladimir before, and Lucky is now dumb. With the deterioration of the body as an intermediary between consciousness and the world, self loses its sense of separation, difference, and uniqueness. When Pozzo is questioned to how and why he became blind, he responds, "I woke up one day blind as Fortune". When questioned further he responds, "Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too".⁷ Although Vladimir and Estragon are not blind, they are being likened to blind men because they have no notion of time as well. The terminal juxtaposition of "Let's go" and the stage direction -"They do not move."- disrupts the causality between language and gesture. Beckett has the body ignore and annul the language which normally instigates its physical action.

There is an extremely tight and hardly definable link between the experience of time and space and one's state of mind, between temporality and one's encounter with "reality". Between chronotopos and one's identity. Temporality is inseparable from being-in-the-world. In Beckett's and Carroll's works time and space are unstable, fragmented. In "Waiting for Godot" the chronotopos is frozen. In "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" time and movement are put in relation to a space that is unstable and whose boundaries are mobile. Space is created as she moves through it and closes up behind her as she exits. It is as if space does not exist unless she inhabits it; the hole deepens as she falls through it; doors, keys, and corridors materialize as she needs them. In such a process time seems to acquire a qualitative ambiguity. Caught in the senseless actions of time, which is not present, Alice wanders.

⁶ Carroll, Lewis (1898): Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. London: Macmillan. 23

⁷ Beckett, Samuel. (1956): Waiting for Godot. London: Faber and Faber. 86

There is no precise goal, no really important place to go, except when the White Rabbit passes. His running after time but, as we know, the time went away.

The scenes in texts are almost autonomous moments, a succession of vignettes, the narrative develops itself at the limits of logical processes, following a nonsensical movement. In this way authors subvert the self-feeling of their personages and prevent the narratives from accumulating a personal history. Of course we all remember the "Med-Tee party", but I have chosen another example from Carroll's book.

Alice asks the Cheshire Cat:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

That depends a good deal on where you want to go," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where"- said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"So long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough.

"Alice felt that this could not be denied, so she tried another question: What sort of people live about here?"

"In that direction," the Cat said, waving its right paw round, "lives a Hatter: and in that direction." waving the other paw, "lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad."

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."⁸

We all know that mad man has problematic (this is of course euphemism) perception of time and space. In Wonderland Alice enters into a "becoming-mad" and gradually loses all notion of her identity: she had to leave her "self" outside the alterable world of the border. "But it's no use now," thought poor Alice, "to pretend to be two people! Why, there's hardly enough of me left to make one respectable person!"⁹ When reality is not measured by time and is not limited by spatial boundaries but lies in an infinite

⁸ Carroll, Lewis (1898): Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. London: Macmillan. 66-67

⁹ Carroll, Lewis (1898): Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. London: Macmillan. 17

time and an abstract space, then words can never be definite about a meaning which must perpetually elude them.

According to Martin Heidegger, human identity is dependent on language: “The being of men is founded in language. But this only becomes actual in conversation”.¹⁰ The most powerful means for “denying the identity” of his characters, that use Beckett and Carroll is language. And that rises the question of meaning. This problem clearly finds its roots in Carroll. In the stories there are several instances to substantiate Carroll's preoccupation. Alice's encounter with the Caterpillar, the riddle she is asked to demystify in “A Mad Tea Party”, the inverted nature of the Jabberwocky poem and Humpty Dumpty's supposed mastery of semantics in explicating the poem, and the confusing ramblings of the Knight throw light on the difficulty of interpretation and conceptualisation of meaning. In fact, “Through the Looking Glass” is a subversion or inversion of meaning; it is a reversal of values. So it can be said that Carroll stands as a precursor of the postmodern critical debate on meaning. We can see also that what Carroll and his critics call the nonsense jargon of the Alice stories is a kind of autonomy of signifiers. The nonsense claims autonomy-detachment from any signified. It also shows Beckett's oeuvre as echoing the nonsense and apparent meaninglessness of Alice's adventures. For Beckett the self cannot be defined in positivist terms, that is merely temporally and spatially. He claimed that there is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication. The tragedy of the human situation lies in the fact that language frustrates the very movement which it instigates, by tying us to an inauthentic non-self in the material world. Language only permits the articulation of self in relation to what it is not. In Beckett's world only the silences conveys meaning in its totality. As words gradually acquire more and more independence from their task of inducing causality they are liberated to interact solely with one another. All Beckett's and Carroll's personages play incessantly with words. In those field they are immensely powerful: they deal with deep, obscure ideas, metaphysical concepts. The authors address primordial questions through absurdity and nonsense, as if they were clearly aware of the impossibility to voice the unspeakable. Through nonsense,

¹⁰ Heidegger, Martin.(1998): Holderlin and the Essence of Poetry. The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends. Ed. Richter, Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 566

meaning is revealed, because an unapparent connection is stronger than an apparent one.

Another function of nonsense is to explore Alice's identity or more accurately speaking, to break all the threads that it withheld. Let me remember the famous scene with Humpty Dumpty. He is sitting on a very high narrow wall. It is indeed a precarious situation that allows him to claim a kind of mastery over words.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean-neither more nor less."

"The question is, whether you can make words mean so many different things." -said Alice.

"The question is", said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master-that's all...They've a temper, some of them-particularly verbs, they're the proudest-adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs-however, I can manage the whole of them! That's what I say!" ¹¹

Alice is bound to remain at the level of the ground, facing the wall, unable to get this overview and control upon words that Humpty Dumpty's position allows. We could draw a parallel between this scene and the famous Lucky's speech in "Waiting for Godot" and to say: the myth of meaning is demolished. The "language chaos" in two famous scenes deconstructs the unity between man and human Logos, hence between personage and his personal identity. And while Humpty Dumpty is ultimate representation of the authoritarian approach to language, Lucky's fragmented, pseudoscientific speech results from Beckett's inner conviction of *absolute absence of the absolute*.

The relationship between power and linguistic definition is one of guiding themes of entire Looking-Glass book. Her encounter with the Red and White Queens shows how language could be used to exert power over somebody. What seems to be implied is that Alice is not only defined externally, but she is not to change. Red Queen advises her not only to remember her place (you are just a little girl), but also to notice that she is to remain a little girl. Alice's progress through the book is governed by her

¹¹ Carroll, Lewis (1906): *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. New York: Macmillan. 269

desire and attempt to become a Queen. When she finally became a queen, the Red and White Queens treat her more like a child than ever. The chapter IX in *Looking-Glass book* (Queen Alice) shows the powerlessness that Alice feels. In this chapter the power over Alice is brilliantly expressed by Carroll's humour, grounded in logic which is either fallacious or correct, but followed to the point of absurdity. Carroll understood that one of the reasons logic has limited use is that it is not suited for dealing with the complexity of meaning present in everyday language.

The entire exchange between Alice and the Duchess is also a strong example of Carroll's cruelty to refuse a personal identity of his personage. This dialog condenses many authoritarian aspect of Wonderland as they are expressed through language. The Duchess (Humpty Dumpty, and Red and White Queens) manipulates Alice putting concrete meaning of the words into abstract forms. The Duchess's advice "be what you would seem to be"¹² in other words means be what you want other to think you are. We saw before in Chapter One, that Alice's identity depends partly on the validation of others. The imperative "be what you would seem to be" implies that Alice is not only defined externally, but she is not to change, not to grow or develop, not to become anything other than what she is now- a child, that does not grow into an autonomous being and to remain under the authority of others. The Duchess's phrase "never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others"¹³ is another example that, whatever Alice thinks she is, cannot be identical with what others think she is and this creates hiatus between a human being and his sense of personal identity. We see how Carroll infiltrates the space between intended and received meaning of words in order his own authority, because the nonsense sets up a space where language and meaning are no longer fixed.

All words that use Vladimir and Estragon are self-misrepresentations. His discourse thus radically negates from the beginning all autobiographical representations of place, other, and self in space, and seeks total indifference, an erasure of time, a self-erasure.

¹² Carroll, Lewis (1898): *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Macmillan. 92

¹³ Carroll, Lewis (1898): *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Macmillan. 92

Time, as aforementioned, is meaningless in this play due to the fusion of the past and present, as well as the forgotten. There is no orderly sequence of events. A tree which is barren one day, is covered with leaves the next. When Pozzo and Lucky return the second day Pozzo is blind, seemingly powerless, and has no idea that he has ever met Estragon or Vladimir before, and Lucky is now dumb. The difference between Pozzo and Lucky in Acts I and II can be explained using the same reasoning that prevented Vladimir and Estragon from taking their own lives. Beckett is conveying to the audience that since time is meaningless in this play, life is just as meaningless. Time and life are both controlled by chance, change, and circumstances. When Pozzo is questioned to how and why he became blind, he responds, "I woke up one day blind as Fortune." When questioned further he responds, "Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too."¹⁴ Although Vladimir and Estragon are not blind, they are being likened to blind men because they have no notion of time as well. Beckett's point that time has no meaning is relevant to Pozzo's and Lucky's situation because the effects of aging, blindness, muteness, loss of power happened in just one night. An entire days memory was wiped out of Pozzo and Estragon's minds. Time held no power over "Fortune"- making both time and one's established life insignificant forces to contend with. "Pozzo: (suddenly furious). Have you not done yet tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Calmer.*) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant then its night once more."¹⁵

In Beckett Language becomes desire and must establish their identity and relationship with the world. When language encompasses everything, then everything turns into dust. It is the same when nothing could be named how in the "Woods where things have no name". It seems clear that for Alice and Beckett's personages language inevitably develops into a destructive element against which they are constantly fighting. And they lost the battle. And while Alice resists in a few moments the

¹⁴ Beckett, Samuel (1965): *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber. 86

¹⁵ Beckett, Samuel (1965): *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber. 89

destructive power of language over her, for Beckett's personages the authentic self can never be born. Failure ensued by a paradox whereby the real self resides "in the silence" outside the alienating system of language that is the speaker's only possible conceptual framework. By the same token, Beckett's "speakers" creating and destroying himself through a combination of corrupt memory. He attempts to dismantle, or destroy, his split self through a kind of vertiginous oblivion.

The philosophers claim that memory is a criteria of personal identity. What they usually mean is that a personal identity somehow depends on certain relationships between various memories and particular relationships between these memories and the person. Memory thus merges autonomous subjects and also knits fragments of time into narrative. All Beckett's characters live in a state of forgetfulness. In the second part Pozzo does not remember having met anyone, and Godot's Boy claims to see them for the first time, while he seems to have been frequenting them constantly as a bearer of Godot's messages. An entire day's memory was wiped out of Pozzo and Estragon's minds. Thus the tension between memory and forgetfulness testifies that there is no fixed "person" and "I" to whom all memories are unilaterally and automatically attributed; rather, the self is elusive, forgetful, and unstable. That is to say that memory repels dissociation, or in Carrollian terms-*nonsense*. As memory contextualizes, meaning emerges and nonsense dissolves into abstraction. Because of that Carroll terminates the memory of his personages or with other words subverts all the components that build the human identity.

"What do you call yourself?"- the Fawn said at last ..."I wish I knew!"- thought poor Alice. She answered rather sadly, "Nothing, just now."... So they walked on together through the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the Fawn, till they came out into another open field, and here the Fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice's arm. "I'm a Fawn!" it cried out in a voice of delight. "And, dear me you're a human child! A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed."¹⁶

¹⁶ Carroll, Lewis (1906).*Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. New York: Macmillan. 64

The fawn's fear of capture can be seen as a metaphor for the narrative's rejection of definition, of linguistic capture. Carroll's text prohibits the articulation of meaning. Just as the fawn detaches from Alice's hold, so too the signified disconnects from the signifier. Memory presumes stable meaning in language, a secure connection of signifier and signified. Thus, by terminating the link between signifier and signified in the "Woods where things have no names", ignorance or memory lost acts as white magic." If there is no meaning in it"-said the King, " that saves the world of trouble, you know, as we needn`t tryto find any."17

At the end of "The Visible and the Invisible", Merleau-Ponty notes that naming is the visible side of the threat of non-recognition, which is the invisible side of naming. To name is to "accredit objectivity, self-identity, positivity, plenitude."18

But here we see something else. Infanility is associated with protection, while remembering of any effort that Alice make to enter the world of adults or to experience self-knowledge is "punished" by Carroll trough nonsense.

Why he do this?

Because at the moment we define things, we acquire power over them. What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance wrote Roland Barthes .

But there is another explanation too-a subtle nuance.

At the bottom of this lost of memory and chaos of words a human being could enjoy a strange feeling of liberation - as if he were liberated from everything both inside and outside him-the body, self-history, other.

I hope I was able to specify why is my paper`s title is "Beckett and Carroll-a violently denial of personal identity ". They both undermining the basic criteria of which it is composed- bodily and spatio-temporalcontinuity, memory and language.

It seems that the language in Beckett`s and Carroll`s work performs an endlessly spiraling series of antitheses and paradoxes, where it produces tensions between the narrative and linguistic impasses. And while this rhetoric of contradictions in "Alice`s Adventures in Wonderland" and "Trough the looking glass" shows how trough

17 Carroll, Lewis (1898): Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. London: Macmillan.122.

18 Merleau-Ponty,M.(1968) The Visible and the Invisible.Ed.Lefort, C. Trans. Lingis, A. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 162

language we could persuade people to bow to our will, Beckett's writing brings self-negation and much more-self-annihilation. The aporia of his language turns the "I" against himself and other and left only one space we could go-the infinite silence.

And why I am so interested in those subject, even it is investigated by so many critics in so many fields. Because nonsense texts foreground the fragility of comprehension and thus reflect the fallacy and weakness of any criticism concerning the questions of who, what, where am I. Carroll and Beckett works are extremely significant, precisely because they deal with the surface, a notion disregarded since we think we "know" it? By looking at any different angle we reveal the depth of the surface. Beckett's silence expresses what is, while the words are an expression of what is not. So great Irishman continues the thought of Sartre, that if man is not what he is, he is what he is not.

There is nothing more meaningful than a text which asserts that there is no meaning.