

SAMUEL BECKETT:

YOU MUST SAY WORDS, UNTIL THERE ARE ANY!

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Abstract: Beckett reveals language as *topos* where human beings reach the limits of subjectivity and confront the anonymity at the heart of communication. This topos reveals that we are absent from one another, from the world, from our life, we are absent even from ourselves. “A large part of Beckett’s work can be understood in terms of the great formula of Malone Dies: Everything divides into itself“. (Deleuze, 1997, p. 156)

In this article, I will discuss the *topoi* of the encounter between language and Self, silence and Self. This encounter creates a threshold – a place of exile, wherein the Self and the Non-Self, timelessness, and temporality, language and silence endlessly co-exist in conflict. Beckett’s language units and separates them. His texts built a rope bridge over the abyss, where One-Self could cross to meet its authentic Self or could understand that the authentic Self is lost or impossible.

Key words: language, Self, Samuel Beckett

They find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray, I’m all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say, that I am they, all of them, those that merge, those that part, those that never meet, and nothing else, yes, something else, that I’m something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place, a hard shut dry cold black place, where nothing stirs, nothing speaks, and that I listen, and that I seek, like a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts.

Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

1.1 The Language as Creator of multiple Identities of Self.

In his book “Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature” (1971), Ihab Hassan wrote that one of the dominant accents of silence which persists in postmodern literature is “the negative echo of language, autodestructive, demonic, nihilist”.¹ One decade after that Frederic Jameson in “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1984) classifies Beckett texts as “schizophrenic writing” that

1 I. Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature*, Oxford U.P., 1971, p. 248.

opened the ‘postmodern force field’ where the narrative subject has lost its capacity to organize its past and future into coherent experience. The result is a heterogeneous and fragmentary language, which Jameson, following Derrida calls textuality or *écriture*.

When it comes to speaking about the role of language in S. Beckett’s texts the definition like linguistic nihilism, complete retreat and destruction are well known and used. His novels and dramas are an unsurpassed example of demystifying the secret power of words. The subject of



„The Prophet“ by Selwyn Rodda (Australia). Oil on maisonite, 125 x 90 cm.

my article requires to be mentioned the great influence of Schopenhauer’s philosophy on Beckett’s aesthetic thinking, who supplied the writer with the metaphor of the veil of Maya. This idea can be seen in Beckett’s early writing on Proust „that there is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication.“ (Beckett, 2010, p. 539) Later he develops the idea that

language is an incapable vehicle for communication. As he remarked in the letter to Axel Kaun of 9th July 1937:

“More and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. [...] To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it-be it something or nothing- begins to seep through. (Beckett, *Disjecta*, 1984)

“Who speaks in Samuel Beckett’s books? [...] Who is the tireless ‘I’ who seems always to say the same thing? Where does it hope to come? What does the author, who must be somewhere, hope for? What do we hope for, when we read? [...] What is the void that becomes speech in the open intimacy of one who disappears into it? Where has he fallen?” (Blanchot, 2003, p. 210)

By asking those simple questions, M. Blanchot explains how Beckett reveals language as a form of death, a place where we meet the limits

of subjectivity and have opened a big discussion that lasts for decades. For Beckett, the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, the fact that words can be used in different contexts and make signify many different things demonstrate the inability of language directly to evoke the true experience. Beckett's project to write a "literature of the unword" corresponds to Blanchot's situating the writer/writing at the threshold of the *il y a*, a term topologically designating the passive, indifferent, irreducible naught of Being. This is the space of writing outside of the language, where words diminish in their ability to signify, where there is neither I nor Other, neither space nor time- where the human existence is between life and death but neither life nor death.

The Levinasian/Blanchovian *il y a* (there is) has to be thought as Being without beings – eclipsed from the world of event, causality, and representation. Simon Critchley writes Blanchot's hypothesis for Beckett's work is that we approach an experience, a literary experience, that speaks to us in a voice that can be described as impersonal, neutral, or indifferent. It is an incessant, interminable, and indeterminable voice that reverberates outside of all intimacy, dispossessing the "I" and delivering it over to a nameless outside.

"Beckett's work draws the reader into a space- the space of literature-where a voice intones obscurely, drawn on by a speaking that does not begin and does not finish, that cannot speak and cannot but speak, that leads language toward what Blanchot calls "an unqualifiable murmur" what I will describe presently as a buzzing, the tinnitus of existence. (Critchley, 1997, p. 173)

Beyond any discussion is the obvious fact that Beckett destroys the basic principles of the writing text where language is let to the last degree of meaninglessness or nonsense. Nevertheless, even in negation he understands the creative power of the word, of language as the main characteristic of the Christian world that strive to order reality because "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God." (John 1:1, KJV) The complete abandonment is impossible: language is our primary mode of expression and the primary means by which our knowledge of Self and world is constituted.

Beckett's ideas about the impossibility of words to express the inner core of human existence were in correspondence with the spirit of the time. According to Derrida the history of Western philosophy has been dominated by the system of "hearing-oneself-speak" which guarantees the presence of the Self to Itself in pure interiority and contributes to the metaphysics of presence and phonocentrism, which he seeks to deconstruct.

“The system of “hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak” through the phonic substance which presents itself as the non-exterior, nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier-has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc.” (Derrida, 1997, pp. 7–8).

In *Language to Infinity* Foucault wrote that in the 18th century the linguistics had discovered a problem in the old logic of representation - naming the world and knowing it are inseparably linked and there is no disjunction in the components of a sign. In Modernity between being and naming there is a rupture and at the core of this fundamental uncertainty start dispersion and implosion of language. Beckett’s art could be seen as a part of the radical experiments with language made by avant-garde movements such as Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism and leading philosophers of language like Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Fritz Mauthner and ctr. They all were demonstrating the gradual destruction of the myth of a language of absolutes, of language as transcendence. Headed toward death, writes Foucault, ”language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power: that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits.” (Foucault, 1977, p.54) And Beckett gave birth to *its own image*.

Beginning with novel “Murphy”, trough “Watt” and then Trilogy Beckett’s outstanding style of using language reveals an important characteristic: the language is Destroyer and Creator at the same time because words are the only carrier and container of personal identity in his novels. The narrator in “The Unnamable”, who is both impossible and existing, longs to be between words and worlds. The questions with which he starts out give away his teleological expectations:

“Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on.” (Beckett, 2009. p.285)

This is exactly the point where my interpretation begins and I would try to disentangle this vicious knot of hope and despair. My point of view contradicts the mainstream critique about the role of language in Beckett’s text. I am deeply convinced that life stories of his personages do not “provide a final answer, but represent ongoing life – in protest, in hope, in tenacity”. (Wolosky, 1995, p. 123)

With the transition from novel “Watt” to the post-war Trilogy, Gilles Deleuze traces the invention of a new kind of language—a meta-language. This langue II, as Deleuze calls it, is the language of a voice that flows without stopping. If paradox in “Watt” exploits the inadequacy of language to represent the world, in Molloy language seems overly powerful, encumbered with enigmatic signifiers, and capable of conducting the influences and desires of others. (Deleuze, 1997) Beckett’s narrator’s stories demonstrate the inadequacy of language as a means of apprehending the reality of the world and Self. However, at the same time, they assume the existence of a metaphysical pact with language that circumscribes and gives structure to Being, constructs their personal identity. Beckett’s heroes are created through the incessant speech – the flow of spoken words create their multiple and mirror reflections. The only *Other* in their world is language and it must establish their identity and relationship with the world and Self. The poetic image of this existential need summarizes Beckett’s hero Watt: “But he had turned, little by little, a disturbance into words, he had made a pillow of old words, for his head. Little by little. And not without labour.” (Beckett, 2009, p. 94)

Beckett achieves this effect in different ways: most of his creatures are telling a story – nevertheless meaningless or meaningful. The author presents occasionally a personage speaking incessantly like Winny (*Happy days*), remembering his life like Krapp (*Krapp last tape*) or could be only a speaking mouth without a body (*Not I*), just a voice without a body (*The Unnamable*). The most powerful example of Self, created by words is Unnamable where Beckett has explored the origins of language and literary creation, their power to bring Self and world into being.

“The voice issues from me, it fills me, it clamors against my walls, it is not mine, I can’t stop it, I can’t prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me.” (Beckett, 2009, p.301)

The narrator is brought into being by the very story he is telling. He is revealed to be both constituting and constituted by words and sounds of his voice. “*The Unnamable*”, writes Curt G. Willits, is, rather, “écriture at and as its own never-ending end: characterized by an unrelenting assault on words, on signification, in a meticulously wrought movement of desultory purposelessness, characterized by the paradoxical play of signifiers voiding themselves of meaning, already always on the way to nothing, but always by way of something, forever condemned to step back inside the circle of logocentrism in stepping outside it.” (Willits, 2005, pp. 262–263). In Beckett’s texts, words shrink from signifier, shifts into creating an imaginative identity, constructed by sounds, and stories. I name this imaginative identity – *prosthetic identity*.

1.2. The Prosthetic Identity

In its ordinary usage, the term *prosthesis* has something that aids the body and makes life easier, an interaction between the body and material objects, inside and outside: a prosthesis (plural: prostheses; from Ancient Greek *prosthesis* - *addition, application, attachment*² is an artificial device that replaces a missing body part, which may be lost through trauma, disease, or congenital conditions. Prosthetics are intended to restore the normal functions of the missing body part.

Y. Tajiri³ mentions in his book “Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism” that Derrida pays attention to the use of the Greek term *parergon* in Kant’s “Critique of Judgement” in order to consider the problem of the border and the frame. A parergon, like a frame, is “a supplement outside the work, but it is also characterized as [n]either simply outside nor simply inside, ‘neither essential nor the accessory, neither proper nor improper.” (Derrida, 1987, p. 9.) This ambiguous thing is not simply an addition to the work (*ergon*) but is in fact necessitated by a certain lack inside it. What I mean by using this concept-*the prosthetic identity of Beckett’s personages?* The prosthetic identity is an imaginary construction, an effective mediator between Self and Non-Self, Self and Other. The narrative hangs on it and it is the narrative itself. It does not belong to the reality of the past or the present events of one personage’s life. It does not unfold from the character’s life history: there is no chronotopos, no family history. There is no here and there.

It is something like *to imagine dead imagine*. That image unites the past, which is becoming increasingly chaotic with an uncertain present and an impossible future. The prosthetic identity of personages and heroes in Beckett’s text increasingly being destroyed by the author and becoming more and vaguer. But is the only Self they have. It is the only proof that they exist. It is sun-shaded web, mirroring the world, after rain seconds before being torn.

The prosthetic identity of Beckett’s personages is an (in)valid sign: invalid because of the disintegration of the signifier, but valid because of functions of signified. Watt’s need of semantic successor was at times so great that he would set to trying names on things. “They turns disturbances into words, longing to hear a voice wrapping up safe in words the kitchen space (Beckett, 2009, p. 83), making a pillow of old words, for a head”

2 Old Greek: πρόσθεσις. Liddell, Henry George; Scott, Robert; A Greek-English Lexicon at the Perseus.

3 My idea of naming this was born after reading the book by Y. Tajiri *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007.

(Beckett, 2009, p.117) and attributing apotropaic powers to explanation: “to explain had always been to exorcise, for Watt.” (Beckett, 2009, p. 78)

The Language, wrote the German philosopher Cassirer in his book *Language and Myth*, harbors the curse of mediacy. The prosthetic identity of Beckett’s character stays on the border between language and silence, sense and nonsense, visibility and invisibility, reality and imagination. It’s role is to restore the missing and non-functional part between Self and Other, Self and World, Self and Not-Self. At this marginal *topos*, the language operates through a system of self-reflexive association that works throughout the text. The prosthetic identity creates a hero’s sense of life and Self but differs from the true, authentic Self and Being: they both share a common quality- that is the human existence. Beckett’s narrators are moved by a desire to be restored philosophically to Self-presence and Self-identity through words. Even through phonemes. No name, no Being can exist outside of words in their worlds. What *The Unnamable* confesses is valid for many of Beckett’s personages: “I’m all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say, that I am they, all of them, those that merge, those that part, those that never meet, and nothing else.” (Beckett, 2009, p. 380)

The Unnamable is a poetic example of Paul Ricoeur’s writings on narrative as Self-formation. For Beckett’s physically disabled, immobilized, isolated, bodily and spiritually disintegrated narrators only words could create the reality of events and the material world. The narrators, especially from the Trilogy, are unable to stop speaking. Why? Because they find in language the only means to control the chaos of leaving, protection from danger, or even to express what is or can be known. They must say words in order to stay alive and must stay alive in order to say words. The language in Beckett’s texts has turned reflection upon itself and like a magician possess the power of giving birth to its own in a play of mirrors that has no limits. This play is the so cold effect *mise en abyme* (a formal technique of placing a copy of an image within itself that creates an infinitely recurring sequence) and it is the ground of vanishing but never totally disappearing prosthetic identity of Beckett’s characters. Beckett is the master of creating this phenomenon even by plays of sounds and rhythm. He himself describes Joyce’s language with the words that could be told either for his own linguistic style: “Sense is forever rising to the surface of the form and becoming the form itself. Thus: When the sense is dancing: the words dance.” (Beckett, 1984, p. 27) However, here arises the tricky question that we try to answer: how could be possible this imaginative prosthetic identity when the personages regress into linguistic waves (*The Unnamable. Not I* and ctr.) and they do not have a body (or

it is fully destroyed) and hence- chronotopos (Bachtin). And “time has turned into space and there will be no more time, until I get out of here.” (Beckett, 2007. Text 8).

How this is possible when the language is inner and outer: it is the only material and condition of existence but at the same time to talk for Beckett’s personages means either to stand outside oneself and to fall into plurality and alienation? “Forever the same murmur, flowing unbroken, like a single endless word and therefore meaningless, for it’s the end gives the meaning to words. But get one with the stupid old threne...” (Beckett, 2007, Text 8) We know that only the language that transcends its own fundamental conditions can become a mode for representing essential Selfhood, to be the base of personal identity. In Beckett, according to Ruby Cohn, the central relationship between character and language is that the mind knows it is limited to and by words, which falsify whatever they approach and “defiantly seeks an essence - call it being, Self, identity. The essence defies verbalization and Beckett defiantly tries to verbalize it.” (Ruby Cohn, 1973, pp. 5–6)

Prosthetic identity is unable to express the essence of Self. Language can only deal meaningfully with a special, restricted segment of reality. But why the critics are so passionately involved in a discussion about the crisis of Self in Beckett’s work? To my opinion because, Beckett has made a powerful picture of how the language creates the prosthetic identity and shows it functions as a shelter but at the same time how this imaginative identity is not referred back to the world or Self. “This means primarily that words, having initiative, are not obliged to designate anything or give voice to anyone, but that they have their ends in themselves. From here on, it is [...] language which speaks itself.” (Blanchot, 1982, p. 41)

Beckett has created the most poetic images of Wittgenstein’s last sentence of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” and incorporated in his texts the essence of his theory of language: “To be sure”- said the great philosopher- “I can imagine what Heidegger means by being and anxiety. Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is a priori bound to be mere nonsense. Nevertheless, we do run up against the limits of language. Kierkegaard too saw that there is this running up against something and he referred to it in a similar way (as running up against paradox). This running up against the limits of language is ethics.” (Waismann, 1979, p. 68)

After creating the prosthetic identity of his personages Beckett de-

stroys it's base – the language on any possible level and pulls the curtain of it. Behind the scene of broken words we see the vague but true image of the authentic Self of Beckett's characters.

But until then “You must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me [...] perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.” (Beckett, 2009, p. 322)

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