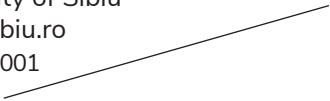


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THE POETICS OF SILENCE: SELF-EFFACING LANGUAGE IN BECKETT'S SHORT WORKS

Abstract: This article examines Samuel Beckett's short prose and late dramatic writing as a sustained experiment in self-effacing language, where silence functions not as a symbolic absence but as a structural and experiential condition of writing itself. Through close readings of *The Unnamable* and the short play *What Where*, the analysis shows how Beckett internalises the conflict between form and formlessness into the texture of the text, replacing character, plot, and psychological interiority with a persistent textual voice that speaks only in order to expose the insufficiency of speech. Drawing on early formalist criticism (Maurice Nadeau), Maurice Blanchot's notion of literary disappearance, and Beckett's own reflections on the misuse of language, the article proposes silence as a real, material, and corporeal presence rather than a purely negative or deferred one. While acknowledging the relevance of poststructuralist and Deleuzian frameworks, the article ultimately contends that Beckett resists theoretical capture through a deadpan seriousness in which "nothing" designates not the absence of meaning, but the insistence of silence as the condition of literary continuation.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, silence, self-effacing language, *The Unnamable*, form and formlessness, literary materiality, late modernism

Along with Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Work in Progress* (*Finnegans Wake*), Beckett's *Trilogy* and particularly *The Unnamable* are arguably the most exploited texts of literature in terms of the philosophical questions they pose, under the umbrella of what has become a whole

interdisciplinary branch of Beckett studies.¹ Given the author's soft spot for the absence of meaning, anguish, the void, death, decay, existential struggles, and the ever waiting for the ever differed metaphysics, it is no wonder that reading his texts in an existentialist (and, inescapably, essentialist) framework prevailed in the literary criticism that first tackled his queer literature.² Maurice Nadeau is among the first critics who discussed in *Combat* in 1951 the "philosophy" of *Molloy* in terms of "make[ing] language into a façade" and "the authority of ruins,"³ thus turning the focus from the struggles of the characters to the struggles with form. The existentialist readings still cling to different forms of conceiving the self beyond the words, a silenced entity that functions within a wider, modernist sense of identity.⁴ The point that Nadeau makes anticipates both the post-structuralist and the postmodernist Beckett (partly overlapped), that will altogether discard the dialectics of silence and words once and for all with Maurice Blanchot's criticism.

While Beckett's work has been extensively read through existentialist, poststructuralist, and Deleuzian frameworks, this article positions itself at a slight but decisive angle to these traditions by refusing to treat silence as either a metaphysical horizon or a purely textual effect. Instead, it approaches silence as a material and operative condition internal to the act of writing—one that does not simply negate meaning, but actively structures the persistence of language. In doing so, the article shifts the critical focus from interpretative paradigms that seek to decode Beckett's "nothing" toward an attention to how writing continues under the pressure of its own insufficiency, where language does not represent absence but is continuously worn down by it.

1. From structural linguistics, anthropology, and psychoanalysis, to feminism, post-structuralist, and postcolonial studies that were spreading throughout the literary domain in the 1970s and 1980s, "each had their Beckett." See Lois Oppenheim, "Introduction," in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2–3.

2. For example, Georges Batailles understands *Molloy*'s struggles as a quest for a fundamental reality, in *Critique* (1951): "'Molloy' reveals is not simply reality but reality in its pure state: the most meagre and inevitable of realities, that fundamental reality continually soliciting us but from which a certain terror always pulls us back, the reality we refuse to face and into which we must ceaselessly struggle not to sink, known to us only in the elusive form of anguish." See "Georges Bataille in 'Critique,'" in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (eds.), *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (Routledge, 2005), 60.

3. See "Maurice Nadeau in 'Combat,'" in Graver and Federman, *Samuel Beckett*, 62.

4. See Erika Mihálycsa, *Trans-lating Modernism: Languages of Passage in the Fiction of Joyce, Flann O'Brien, Beckett* (Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2015), 33

Trying to reclaim Beckett's literary mode of thinking from philosophical overinterpretations, Blanchot argues that, while philosophy remains oriented toward truth, "literature is heading towards itself, towards its essence which is disappearance."⁵ From this perspective, reading Beckett primarily through established schools of thought risks subordinating the text to external conceptual frameworks, whereas in *The Unnamable* what is at stake is not truth as such, but the persistence of writing under conditions that undo its own representational claims. At the same time, situating the Trilogy exclusively within poststructuralist textualism proves equally limiting: although it abandons essentialist notions of truth, it remains a scholarly mode of mediation that can obscure the more immediate, experiential pressure through which Beckett engages form and formlessness.

Before plunging into these limitations, however, it is worth dwelling on what silence means to Beckett, what Blanchot and the poststructuralist suite have to say about it, and with direct references to the *Unnamable* trilogy and the short play *What Where*:⁶

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)⁷

The beginning of the *Unnamable* poses the questions that will overtly haunt Beckett's prose from this moment on (e.g. *Imagination dead imagine* and *Lessness*), as well as the plays, each of them being a reiteration of the "unquestionable" questions. It is almost too tempting to thematise the struggle to ask these questions (despite knowing there is no solid answer to them) as an existentialist contemplation of the ultimate freedom of putting an end to one's life, but, in an exercise just as important in freedom, choosing to go on, despite the misery and futility of life that undeniably mark the textual world of Beckett. Confronted with this kind of ontologically grounded reading, here is what Beckett had to say:

When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence they may be right, I don't know, but their language is too

5. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, transl. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 237.

6. For the purposes of this paper, I chose only the play *What Where*, but it is worth mentioning that any late short minimalist play could be considered for analysis.

7. Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, transl. Samuel Beckett (Grove Press, 1958), 3.

philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that now is simply the mess... what I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. In only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say the chaos is really something else... To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now... There is the unexplainable, and there art raises questions that it does not attempt to answer.⁸

What Beckett seems to do is reaffirming his aesthetic autonomy as a writer who tries to find a form for formlessness, be it chaotic experience devoid of origin and scope that the modernist sensibility is prone to, or the messiness of language, in the same manner, devoid of arche and telos, that mark the "centre" of postmodernist thinking. The silence is, in short, the mode of writing that attempts to articulate the chaos without ordering it. The paradox is that such a form of writing is surprisingly prolific and apparently *inexhaustible*. Here comes into play John Barth's well known concept of the "literature of exhaustion" that affirms the self-generating power of literature, the power to consume old/exhausted tropes and generate new texts (in a way, the same invariants in terms of images, but poured in new forms of expression that actually reshape the images). In this sense, the text is no more about the struggles to cope with a meaningless life, the text is the struggle to cope with the lack of meaning that grounds our representation of the world, in the poststructuralist sense of having a signified that is always postponed and never actualised, much in the way that Godot is only expected, never present. The unnamed voice from the *Unnamable* thus seems to lament about 1) the issue of creating new pieces of literature after the realisation that words are not the mediums for a metaphysical signified, "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning"⁹) the problem with talking about an ontologically grounded self that is not fragmented and thus can think about itself in a Cartesian manner, "I, say I. Unbelieving"¹⁰) the disintegration of truth or perhaps a meta-consciousness of the voice that does not succeed in being a solid point of reference in its world (the voice contradicts itself constantly, as with Mahood, who we simply do not know if it is another character or another face of the narrating voice¹¹).

8. Samuel Beckett quoted in Carla Locatelli, *Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett's Prose Works After the Nobel Prize* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 14.

9. Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 3

10. Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 3.

11. Beckett, *The Unnamable*: "In the meantime it's Mahood: this caricature is he.

And, finally, there is 4) the textual voice that keeps going on, in spite of the failure of words ("call that going, call that on"). Now it is the time to explain that I keep calling it "textual voice" since, unlike in *Murphy* where the problem of form and formlessness (Gr. *morphe*) is thematised, here the conflict is internalised in the "texture" of the text. We cannot talk about proper characters, plot or chronology, there is a systemic internal resistance to realist modes of representation, in an extreme form of overt metafiction. Much as the textual voice in John Barth's transgressive metafiction *Lost in the Funhouse*, that I discussed elsewhere¹², the voice here acknowledges its textuality and rambles about the struggles to exist solely through words:

I'll go on. You must say words, as long as there are any — until they find me, until they say me. (Strange pain, strange sin!) You must go on. Perhaps it's done already. Perhaps they have said me already. 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).¹³

Although Beckett's work can be productively read through Deleuzian concepts such as the *image* or the operation of *abstract machines*,¹⁴ and despite the fact that many of the central figures of so-called French Theory developed their own Beckettian readings, his writing resists full absorption into this critical framework. What persists instead is a stubborn, irreducible realness—a deadpan seriousness that exceeds the diagrammatic or machinic logic through which it is often approached. As *Malone Dies*, the second novel in the trilogy, tells us, "Nothing is more real than nothing."¹⁵ The "nothingness" at the core of Beckett's poetics is not only another word for the absence of the

What if we were one and the same after all, as he affirms (and I deny)? And I have been in the places where he says I have been, instead of having stayed on here, trying to take advantage of his absence to unravel my tangle? Here, in my domain? What is Mahood doing in my domain, and how does he get here?" (37) and "I've been he an instant, hobbling through a nature which (it is only fair to say) was on the barren side and (what is more, it is only just to add) tolerably deserted to begin with" (39).

12. Ana-Maria Deliu, "Transgressive Metafiction: Deconstructing Worlds in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 2, no. 2, (2016): 144–156.

13. Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 179.

14. See Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and Garin Dowd, *Abstract Machines: Samuel Beckett and Philosophy after Deleuze and Guattari* (Rodopi, 2007).

15. Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, transl. Samuel Beckett (Grove Press, 1956), 7.

signified, the elusive “centre” of the knowledge structure made present only through representation (though it is also that), in Blanchot’s terms, “an endless recapitulation.”¹⁶ The “nothingness” is also the silence (here, Blanchot comes closer to how I read Beckett), a silence that is fundamental, real, corporeal, substantial, and that deserves dwelling on.

First stop in trying to understand Beckett’s poetics is the famous letter sent to Axel Kuhn in 1983:

And 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. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. ... To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.¹⁷

Beckett is famous for his vagueness, even when stage directors directly ask him about meaning or intention. Yet the holy grail of post-structuralist criticism seems to lie in the assurance that there is something behind the veil, perhaps a Nothing with a capital N, something that must, in the end, be unveiled, un-worded, and stripped of the mediating screen of language; as *Molloy* articulates out of nowhere in the context of an unrelated fit of anger, “It seemed to me that all language was an excess of language.”¹⁸ Of course, hermeneutics, the idea that there is an encoded meaning at the core of the things that needs only to be discovered (also a structuralist idea) could work in *Murphy* or *Watt*, for example in deciphering names, but could never work with the *Unnamable* or with the later plays. Let us not forget that Beckett was not satisfied with *Waiting for Godot* precisely because it has been generally read as a modern allegorical myth. The metaphor of the veil could lead to thinking about hermeneutics, but the first impression is corrected by the idea that this veil is viscerally torn apart, not mathematically deciphered. What is behind the veil?

16. See Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, transl. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

17. Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (Grove Press, 1984), 171.

18. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* transl. Patrick Bowles and Samuel Beckett (Grove Press, 1955), 111.

It will be I? It will be the silence, where I am? I don't know, I'll never know:
 in the silence you don't know.
 You must go on.
 I can't go on.
 I'll go on.¹⁹

The silence seems thus the state of writing that makes possible the proliferation of indeterminacy (that Blanchot called “the neuter”, and Alain Badiou, “the grey black”). By foregrounding this postmodern state of writing, Beckett does not seek to arrive at some form of ultimate, chaotic, unordered, but essentialist, truth-beyond-language, but rather to expose the conditions under which language persists despite its own insufficiency. Silence does not have to be understood against language, since, following Blanchot's lines of thought, language incorporates silence, the “excess of language” being always counteracted by its incapacity to fully contain what it brings into being. This, I think, is the revelation of Beckett: the metafictional, self-generating language is also self-effacing, self-negating, and thus has to be minimised not in order to access a truth beyond language, but to register its own limits from within.

If the realisation that language is anti-representational drove James Joyce into a proliferation of language, culminating with *Mamafesta*, Beckett abandoned this path relatively early, perhaps after writing *Watt*. The path Beckett chooses instead—minimalism and reductionism, “lessness”—is analysed by Kathryn White as a slow progression, although not linear, toward the “non-word,” that is, the attempt to register formlessness within language.²⁰

What *Where* is the last play by Beckett. The minimalist aspects of the play are: the presence of only one character, split into four instances, much in the way of the “schizoid” character from *Ohio Impromptu*; the minimalist setting that plays with light and shape and does not attempt to visually render the passages of time; the voice “beyond the grave” (as Beckett mentions directing a production) that fulfils the function of informing the audience about the passage of time and gives directions to the characters; the monotonous voices; the pauses and silences that are valued for creating rhythm; and, perhaps the most used technique in his later works, repetition: designing the play to create maximum effect with as few words as possible, even if that means repeating the same words.

19. Beckett, *Unnamable*, 179.

20. Kathryn White, *Beckett and Decay* (Continuum, 2009), 109–131.

The mouth from *Not I* is similar in this regard, a voice that becomes the character (only the mouth is illuminated) and that conveys a linguistic crisis. Of course, Beckett reaches the minimum of words, that is zero, in *Act Without Words or Breath*, but was not satisfied with this approach to formlessness either. Perhaps he needed the conflict of form and formlessness inherent in language in order to stage it and inscribe it within the plays.

What seems to drive the conflict in *What Where* (as much as we can talk about conflict in a non-representational play), to build tension, is the coexistence of meaningful silence and residues of communication, that is, repetition. We hear over and over again that he “wept”, “screamed” and “begged for mercy”, but he did not “say it.”²¹ The procedure then starts again, “he” meaning in turn (presumably the absent) Bum, then Bom, Bim, Bem, and the mission of obtaining the information becomes increasingly absurd: Bam wants to know that “he said it to him”, then he wants to know simply “where.” Silence is thematised: the only “it” he needs to find out is never worded and the more he inquires about it, the further it takes him from it — not because it conceals a recoverable core, but because it is never constituted as such — much in the same manner that the efforts of the character in *Act Without Words* only bring more distance between him and the object he craves. But silence is also inscribed into the rhythm of the play, in the pauses between the interrogations. In the end, having exhausted all the possibilities of inquiry, Bam is completely silent, left in an ever more suspended waiting with his head bowed.

Of course, read in a political grid, it could mean facing the consequences of tyranny, since there is nobody left to torture and extract the “truth” from. But it is foremost a play on loneliness and the impossibility of arriving at any “core” through language, inscribing the earlier questions “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning” in a grotesque way.

Here lies the difference between Beckett’s poetics of silence and (mainstream) poststructuralist readings: the “core,” the “it” does not translate into the absent centre of the structure of knowledge. Derrida, who wrote extensively on Joyce, language, and knowledge, remained notably silent on Beckett, despite a proximity that has often been remarked upon in criticism, including Steven Connor.²² The frustration

21. See Samuel Beckett, “What Where,” in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (Faber and Faber, 1986): 473–478.

22. See Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*. Basil Blackwell, 1988.

transpires in Beckett's plays and most of the prose not because the "it" is real and essential but ineffable, but because language cannot stabilise what it incessantly attempts to produce. Beckett sets himself up to failure by trying to "eff it," which is why the poetics of silence also becomes a poetics of failure. Methodical in his approach, he remains fundamentally paradoxical in staging the persistence of writing under the pressure of its own undoing.

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