

EDWARD BIZUB

SOUNDS, SENSE AND SIGNATURE

Beckett's Swerving Identity

Beckett's declaration in a letter addressed to Alan Schneider in 1957 describing *Endgame* as "a matter of fundamental sounds" (Beckett 1983, 109) is the starting point of an examination of the dialectical process the author establishes between these sounds and the meaning which they resist. Beckett's task is one of effacing meaning, but in his comprehension of this task, meaning is linked to identity and identifiability. Identity must be understood here as both personal (who am I?) and ontological (is object A identical to object B?). Beckett deliberately plays with both concepts. For example, in *Waiting for Godot* where the Pozzo of the second act may not be the same as the one in the first – he may even be Godot! –, just as we are not sure if the trees in the two acts are identical. The writer's particular exploitation of sounds is to be analyzed in examples taken from three different texts, examined in reverse chronological order: the name "Hamm" in *Endgame*, the name "Godot" in *Waiting for Godot* and the pun in the title of *Whoroscope*. The "fundamental sounds" in these texts are far from arbitrary. They are strictly on their guard in trying to avoid all meaning imposed on them by a superior and tyrannical Logos. On the one hand, they strive to preserve their 'virginity', but on the other hand, they seem contaminated by the Logos and struggle to resist its 'definition' as best they can, often by playing with their own sounds to prevent being entirely mastered. Identity is a philosophical and psychological category. A signature, on the other hand – and here we shall introduce the concept as described by Derrida – is a way of *representing* oneself through writing, but Beckett 'swerves' adroitly between ontology and representation. His writing is from the start a struggle with the text and with its supposed dictates, a literary struggle with the Cartesian *cogito* in the author's refusal – in the text's refusal – to say "I".

The words addressed to Alan Schneider in 1957 expressing irritation at the constant demand on the part of critics (and actors and directors as well) are known to all Beckett scholars: "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin" (Beckett 1983, 109). However, one might justifiably argue that among the overtones of his work

leading up to this letter, which can be read as a kind of manifesto, the theme of identity plays an integral part.

Beckett's work, from the very beginning, seems bent on exploring the concept of identity. His very first poem, *Whoroscope*, written spontaneously to meet the demands of a poetry contest (the existence of which he learned at the last minute), managed to twist the imposed subject, Time, into a dramatic monologue spoken by a raving Descartes. At the heart of the poem lies the question of the cogito : *cogito, ergo sum*. The exact words of the French philosopher in the French version of the *Second Meditation* are in fact : "*je suis, j'existe*". I am, I exist. If I am, I can be defined and given a name. To be is to be identified. And that is exactly what the Beckettian subject strives to avoid.

Belacqua's striving for an "emancipation from identity" in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* has been seen as announcing Murphy's aspiration in the 1938 novel bearing his name (Ackerley and Gontarski, 389). This process is pursued further in the trilogy. In *Molloy*, the inability to remember the name of his birthplace brings with it the protagonist's loss of his own identity : "And even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate..." (Beckett 2010, II, 27). Chris Ackerley points out how Molloy's evolution in the trilogy – "as identity fades » – brings him into a world of "nameless things", thus heralding the "great mystery of *The Unnamable*" (Ackerley 2013, 101).

The loss of identity is a key element in what Adorno calls the writer's method of putting "meaning on trial" : "Beckett's œuvre already presupposes this experience of the destruction of meaning as self-evident [...]. Beckett's plays are absurd not because of the absence of meaning, for then they would be simply irrelevant, but because they put meaning on trial..." (Adorno 1997, 153). The emancipation from identity in a world of nameless things renders meaning obsolete, and Beckett's *fundamental sounds* are part of this process.

Before examining the different sounds, however, we should not forget that identity is a key concept in the author's personal experience. As a member of a minority culture, a Protestant in Catholic Ireland, his identity was somewhat problematic from the outset. For the majority of his compatriots he was associated with the dominant class representing the foreigner, the English invader, enjoying special privileges. Nevertheless, considered as different in his homeland, Beckett recalls that he was in no way favorably distinguished in England during his stay there, for he was treated with the same polite contempt generally reserved for the Irish, with no distinction as to their origin. What is curious, however, is the fact that on his father's side, Beckett is neither of English nor of Irish descent. His ancestors were French Huguenots. The original family name was Bécquet, a name which the writer uses to tease the audience in his play *Eleutheria*. "Au fait, qui a fait ce navet ? (*programme*) Beckett (*il dit* : 'Béquet') Samuel. Béquet, Béquet, ça doit être un juif groenlandais mâtiné d'Auvergnat" (Beckett, 1995, 136). In other words, when the writer turns his back on the English language to write in French, one of the great turning points of his career, he is in a certain way reverting,

symbolically at any rate, to his ancestor's original tongue. He could perhaps even have the impression of returning to the source of his identity.

The "curse" of identity seen as a factor of alienation may have made Beckett the ideal proponent of the modernist revolt against all definition, and especially that conferred and conveyed by religion. It is, of course, a great leap from biography to ideology, but Beckett seems to have made that leap. He blames the paralysis of modern literary culture on the power of the Holy Word.

In a letter written in German to his friend Axel Kaun in 1937 (Beckett 1983, 51-54), Beckett expresses his annoyance at the fact that, in the context of the modernist revolution in the arts, literature has remarkably remained behind the other modes of expression. He hopes to take up the cause of literature in order to catch up with the developments in music and painting. And to do so, he must emancipate writing from the *diktat* of the Holy Word: *Das heilige Wort*. That Word is paralyzing, maiming (*lähmend*). One recalls the maimed characters whose handicaps become part of their identity and who wend their way, nevertheless, to the best of their capacity, throughout Beckett's work. Their handicap may well "represent" the result of the Logos's maiming power. But it may also express the writer's way of defying – and showing his disdain for – the Logos. A sort of vengeance which can be translated thus: "You think you have won, but I have nothing but scorn for your language, your laws, your literary rules and conventions, your holier-than-thou dictates." In other words, the reproach ("Look what you've done to me") may actually be perversely twisted – in spite of the suffering – into a bitter and vicious act of revolt: "But look what I'm doing to you!" (my formulation).

In *Endgame*, Hamm defines himself as being absent, but it is a symbolic absence, that of someone who, deprived of identity, has not yet experienced existence. He can thus have no grasp on reality: "Absent, always. It all happened without me. I don't know what's happened" (Beckett 2010, III, 144). The very idea of meaning, of producing sense, is mocked:

Hamm : What's happening ?

Clov : Something is taking its course.

Pause.

Hamm : Clov !

Clov (*impatiently*) : What is it ?

Hamm : We're not beginning to ... to ... mean something ?

Clov : Mean something ! You and I, mean something ! (*Brief laugh.*) Ah that's a good one ! (*Ibid.*, 112-113)

A text designed to be without meaning justifies Beckett's refusal, when confronted with Schneider's request for some kind of interpretation, to be "involved in exegesis of any kind" (Beckett 1983, 109). Scholars who seek that sort of understanding are rebuked: "we have no elucidations to offer of mysteries that are all of their making" (*Ibid.*). The fundamental sounds in Beckett's writing are designed to defy exegesis.

The crux of the problem can be found at the heart of what in general constitutes the very mark of identity: a person's name. In *Endgame*, the struggle between the fundamental sounds and the Holy Word can be found in the way Beckett plays with the sounds of the main character's name. The intrigue pivots at once around Hamm's position on stage as well as around certain connotations suggested by his name. Indeed, his *central* position in the drama is of major concern to Hamm. He insists on being placed exactly in the center of the stage. When he asks Clov to take him for "a little turn", his position is of the utmost importance and betrays his anxiety: "Hug the walls, then back to the centre again. [...] I was right in the centre, wasn't I?" (Beckett 2010, III, 107). At the end of his "little turn" he wants to be sure of his position :

Hamm : Back to my place ! [...] Is that my place ?

Clov : Yes, that's your place.

Hamm : Am I right in the centre ? (*Ibid.*, 108)

The situation is rather paradoxical, because being in the center only highlights the impossibility of any attempt at a precise definition of the character's identity. By playing with Hamm's name, Beckett puts the spectator on different tracks which seem to contradict and annihilate one another. One has the impression of a heroic but nevertheless doomed stance on the part of sounds attempting to abort helter-skelter the Logos's onslaught. Remove the second "m" in Hamm's name and we discover the designation of a particular meat derived from pork. The character is thus linked by the sounds – but metonymically by the sense – to his servant Clov. For the word *clove*, in English, is the name of the spice associated with ham, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world. Stuck into the meat, it gives a particular flavor, a little zest ; in the same way, Clov's replies in the play seem to "spice up" the action. But it is also a subtle suggestion of torment, for the word *clove* is derived from the French "*clou*" (the spice in French is *clou de girofle*) and means "*nail*".

We may, however, listen to the sounds in another way. In the original French version (*Fin de partie*), the main character's name, its initial letter "H" remaining unaspirated, is pronounced "am". Both the vowel "A" and the consonant "M" are indeed fundamental. They represent the first prelinguistic sounds articulated by an infant in several different cultures, the "A" (pronounced like "ah !") being the most natural sound produced by an open mouth without any constriction, and the "M" being the first articulation of a sound destined to become a consonant produced by a mouth which is entirely shut. It is no wonder that these two sounds conspire to produce, in very summary words – often baby-like – the syllable "MA" evoking the concept *mother* in several unrelated idioms as far apart as English and Chinese. Curiously, this primitive syllable is the meeting point between sound and sense in that it often becomes the first articulation of the Logos. It likewise suggests the mantra "OM", supposedly expressing the fundamental sound of our resonance with the universe.

But the character's name pronounced in the original French version also suggests the first person of the verb *to be* in English. "I am". *Am* is the English equivalent of *sum*, as in the *cogito* of Descartes : *Cogito, ergo sum*. At the end of his process of reasoning and his confrontation with the evil genius who is supposed to make him believe that all he thinks is false, the philosopher exclaims : "*je suis, j'existe*". I am, I exist. It is the inaugural act of any possibility of an existential or philosophical identity.

The verb "am" is likewise the definition of the Supreme Being, given in response to Moses' interrogation on Mount Sinai. The Supreme Being defines himself as the Holy Word of Being – in the first person – and establishes the equivalence between Hamm's name, Descartes' *cogito* and the identity of the Almighty. He is the *sum* by definition: *I am what I am*. A perfect tautology, the tautology of identity. He is identified thus and wishes to be defined that way as the source of his message : "... thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you" (Exodus 3 :14). *AM* is the Holy Word that paralyzes and maims, according to Beckett, and this destructive power is illustrated in the fact that Hamm is confined to a wheel-chair and is stricken with blindness.

That blindness is linked to the chief character's name in another way. Ham, written with one "m" harks back to a biblical character, one of Noah's sons. The story is quite simple. Ham enters his father's tent and finds him naked, and apparently drunk. This seemingly innocent act becomes the occasion of a curse. Ham is banished and condemned to wander for having seen something which is of the order of a taboo. Is it because he saw the genitals of his father, the source of his existence? Is the association, by metonymy, of copulation and inebriation (expressions of an irrational drive?), something which must be kept secret? What did he see after all? Whatever it was, it has something to do with fatherhood. Hamm gives us a clue to this mystery as he sees it when he hurls words of imprecation at his own father who is entirely maimed, deprived of limbs and locked up in a trashcan. He addresses him as "accursed progenitor" (Beckett 2010, III, 96) and then tantalizes him by reminding him of his degraded state: "Accursed fornicator! How are your stumps?" (*Ibid.*).

Thanks to recent scholarly research, we now know for sure that Beckett definitely had in mind this passage from Genesis when he conceived his play (Herren 2013, 120). But that particular source, as I will argue later on, does not prove that the other echoes of that "fundamental sound" are irrelevant, nor that it was necessarily its primary articulation. . For the time being, suffice it to say that the polyphony associated with Hamm's name can be interpreted as a struggle with the idea of definition, of identity. Nevertheless, the sound's polysemical nature – for each variant of these oral signifiers presents a definite signified – can just as well be seen from two angles: either as heroic resistance to the Logos's attempt at imposing his stamp of meaning on a near infinite oral potential or, on the other hand, as the slippery slope of submission, the gradual realization of the impossibility of escaping definition altogether, for meaning, as much as we try to elude it, pops up everywhere.

Beckett expressed surprise at the fact that critics and public alike resorted to so many different symbolical and allegorical interpretations in their commentary of *Waiting for Godot*. He affirmed to Alec Reid that, in fact, his purpose was to write a play “which strove at all costs to avoid definition” (Reid 1962, 130). His intention is clear. Whenever an inkling of meaning appears, the text does its best to nullify it immediately, and when, in turn, another sprout of meaning rears its head, it is likewise immediately nipped in the bud. And so on. A kind of infernal machine of affirmation and negation with seemingly no end in sight. On the level of the plot, Beckett – in his role as author – is the one who impedes Godot’s arrival, the hope of his presence being the goal of the entire intrigue, the ultimate promise of meaning and the symbol of Being in general. Godot is then the emblem of Beckett’s refusal of meaning in the play.

In *Beckett et Descartes dans l’œuf* (Bizub 2012) and in a subsequent article, “Beckett’s Boots” (Bizub 2013), I undertook the task of listening closely to the fundamental sounds composing Godot’s name. We know that Beckett refused the interpretation of this name as a hidden allusion to God, declaring that what he had in mind was a special piece of footwear defined by the French word “*godillot*” (Benson 1987, 27). The “*godillot*” translates into English as a *hobnailed boot*. So the mysterious Godot was originally an item of sturdy footwear designed for military or agricultural use. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989), after specifying that the short nail used to make these particular boots is the same as the one “used for the bottom of Plough-Men’s shoes”, goes on to say that the “hobnail” can also designate, through a synecdochal transfer, the “man who wears hobnailed shoes ; a rustic, clodhopper, clown”. Can we thus imagine that the mysterious Godot around whom the entire action of the play pivots was conceived of by Beckett as a “clodhopper” or a simple “clown” ?

Following this lead, however, I established that Godot’s name, inspired by the *hobnailed boot* is an encoded form of Beckett’s ancestral patronymic, the *Father’s Name* in its original French pronunciation: *Bécquet* (Bizub 2013, 274). I also pointed out that the writer plays with this patronymic in *Eleutheria* where footwear is, in one of the central scenes of the play, symbolically – and ostentatiously – linked to the protagonist’s father (*Ibid.*, 268). What is however never specified – and, as far as we know, has never been acknowledged by the writer himself – is the fact that the two names – that of Godot and Beckett’s patronymic – are synonyms. Indeed, the common noun *bécquet*, in one of its meanings, refers, as Leslie Hill pointed out, to a “hobnail boot” (Hill 1990, 113). Actually, the French word, as found in *Harrap’s Standard French and English Dictionary*, a likely source for Beckett who, as we know, was a consulter of dictionaries and certainly curious concerning the origin of his family name, is translated, in boot makers’ jargon, simply as “hobnail”. *Pars pro toto* ? At any rate, we have seen that the *hobnail*, in English, designates not only the boot but the person who wears it as well.

Hill, while making the link between “*bécquet*” and the author’s patronymic, which may indeed explain why shoes and boots play an essential role in Beckett’s work,

especially in *Godot*, did not go on to draw the conclusion resulting from the fact that the writer's patronymic and the name of Godot, through the clever use of sounds in a sort of bilingual pun, refer to the *same* reality: the same boot!

Identity reduced to a hobnailed boot? A pun on the author's name? Are the sounds which make up a writer's patronymic and those used to translate those sounds into alternative ones – in a foreign language – considered to be “fundamental”? These two different sets of sounds resonate, creating an echo which rebounds from one language to another, thanks to the “sound” of a boot. Is this some kind of Beckettian joke, or should we take the matter seriously? We remember that Beckett's purpose in his play was to strive “at all costs to avoid definition”. In other words, the refusal of definition in the course of the intrigue is motivated by the rejection of the father's presence: Estragon starts by trying to remove his shoe; Victor, in *Eleutheria*, at his father's death, in an attempt to be finally emancipated, throws his shoe out of his bedroom window.

The refusal of definition in *Godot* is equivalent to a rejection of the seal of identity. That seal is – symbolically – the father's name: the *nom-du-père*. Symbol of identity. In psychoanalytical terms, the refusal to recognize this symbol – one remembers here Lacan's definition of *foreclosure* – is the definition of a psychotic state (I developed this theme in *Beckett et Descartes dans l'œuf*: Bizub 2012, 279). This state, as experienced by the psyche, is linked to that of banishment and wandering. We may wonder if that particular state is similar to the one that Ham undergoes in Genesis when he, apparently unwittingly, uncovers the root of symbolical fatherhood in its most basic, material manifestation through his discovery of Noah's naked body and his inebriated state, a discovery which earns him the curse of banishment.

Whoroscope constitutes the inaugural moment of Beckett's career, for it is the first text published separately under his name. The fortuitous fruit of an English poetry contest organized in Paris in June 1930, its title is a pun on the word of Greek derivation “*horoscope*” and the English word “whore”. Its 98 verses on the imposed theme of Time are consecrated exclusively to the life and work of René Descartes. In the first stanza, the French philosopher is sniffing eggs in order to determine which of them is best suited to enter into his breakfast fare, that is to say which of them is in conformity with the rules he has laid down for their inclusion in his morning omelette. That scene which makes up the first stanza of the poem is based on an anecdote drawn from Adrien Baillet's biography of Descartes. Condensed to the extreme, this Beckettian “omelette” determines the framework of the entire poem and, as I have shown elsewhere, a kind of matrix for the work to come (Bizub 2012).

The title of the poem may be read as a nutshell of Beckettian poetics in that it harbors, through the use of sounds, a bilingual pun that reflects or criticizes – the two activities are not the same – the theme of identity. It is thus through sounds that the English signifier “whore” insinuates itself into the Greek word for time, or more exactly the time of day (hour), “*horos*”. To a certain extent we can say that the signifier upsets or undermines the signified. This wilful confusion becomes in itself the gambit of

Beckett's concept of identity. The single word of the title sets up two poles which are definitely antagonistic, suggesting an inner struggle. We might suppose that this title constitutes in itself the primitive "unword" – "*Unwort*" (Beckett 1983, 54) – which the writer will eventually determine as an essential element of his aesthetics. The pole of *horos* represents not only the imposed theme of the poetry contest (Time) but the dictate of identity. The *horoskopos* in ancient Greece, originally the *person* whose function was to *read* the stars, determines by his very reading the destiny of the newborn child, thus conferring on him his identity. We can thus immediately see how this reading limits and *defines* that identity by inscribing the new-born child into a system of laws and conventions, symbolized by the place allotted to him by the conjunction of astral constellations at the moment of his birth, and by his genitor's *name*.

In Beckett's title, the word "*horos*", a kind of dictate of identity and of the law of being, is disrupted by its "fundamental sound", for the "w" in English being a silent consonant, the oral signifier "whore" uses, usurps – fundamentally! – the same sound to express itself. It is only through the act of *writing* – the ostentatious presence of the silent "w" – that the Word's inner struggle, through a deep "rumbling", is made manifest, for the "whore" unsettles the law of identity that inscribes a child in the father's lineage and contests symbolically – as a linguistic signifier albeit 'silent' – and perhaps even allegorically, the dictate of sense, rendering futile any attempt at meaning. We are, of course, reminded of Beckett's project in *Godot* whereby the text is designed to avoid definition "at all costs".

Beckett's fascination with antagonistic forces at the heart of writing harks back to his analysis of Joyce's *Work in Progress*. The two conflicting poles are described in traditional allegorical terms: "On this earth that is Purgatory, Vice and Virtue – which you may take to mean any pair of large contrary human factors – must in turn be purged down to spirits of rebelliousness" (Beckett 1983, 33). In *Whoroscope*, Vice and Virtue seem to have been "purged down" to sound and sense. Years later we read in *Murphy* an axiom which may be applied in retrospect to Beckett's "inaugural" poem: "In the beginning was the pun" (Beckett 2010, I, 43). The very word "pun" is itself an ironic commentary and a mocking distortion of the Biblical "*logos*" which is the original word, and the Word in its original Greek form, in the first sentence of Saint John's Gospel. At the beginning of Beckett's work, the inaugural pun is enacted by the whore contesting the Logos and its dictates of identity. The fundamental sound common to "whore" and "*horos*" becomes the locus of the struggle between two "contrary factors", two "spirits of rebelliousness" at the heart of the Word.

We see then that the fundamental sound made visible by the "w" which threatens the stability of the Logos is anything but arbitrary. We may even argue that another fundamental sound is present in *Whoroscope* and that the "whore" is there to counter it. Although it is never pronounced, it is the "AM" of Descartes' *cogito* ("I am") which, exploited explicitly in *Endgame*, as we have seen, constitutes the subliminal sound of *Whoroscope*. Indeed, the whole thrust of the poem contests this "AM" from many

different angles. The figure of the whore in the title mocks the notion of identity imposed by the *horoskopos* and by his reading of the stars and thus, symbolically, by the dictates of fatherhood, of destiny and the law. Indeed, the poem, as I have suggested in *Beckett et Descartes dans l'œuf*, is an attack on paternity in numerous ways, not the least of which is the fact that Beckett's Descartes refuses to assume his patronymic but, as in real life, identifies himself primarily in the antepenultimate verse as René du Perron (Beckett 2010, IV, 6), thus placing himself clearly in a maternal lineage. The title "*du Perron*" comes from the property the philosopher inherited from his mother and, through that lineage, René ("*re-né*") considers himself to be *reborn*. Therefore, both the "whore" and the mother, each in a different fashion, represent a refuge from the Father's Name, from the stamp of identity.

Descartes' identity is thus seen by Beckett as a swerving one, for the poet mocks, in a very substantial part of the poem, the foundation of the *cogito*. He mocks, in verses 77-83, the way in which the philosopher denigrates his mundane, bodily existence springing from his earthly father, that is to say from an act of copulation, in order to glorify his descendance from a divine immaterial being responsible for the only part of his existence that he recognizes as valid, that of his thinking self. Descartes' refusal of his patronymic and his "inscription" in his maternal lineage reminds us of an "immaculate conception". The fact that Beckett deploys the "whore" to combat the Holy Word and the "I AM" suggests perhaps an irreverent comment on that very "conception". Chris Ackerley has shown how one of the major impulses of Beckett's work is – through his characters as proxies – his attempt to "crack the atom of Cartesian consciousness" (Ackerley 2013, 101) while reminding us that the word "atom", etymologically speaking, signifies "indivisibility", the indivisibility of the atom being equated with the indubitable in Descartes' quest, that moment or that reality beyond which one cannot go. It is the "I am" beyond which one cannot go, unless in Beckett's aesthetics, it is the "whore" that cracks the "atom" of identity, breaking it down into its "swerving" mutually rebellious parts. An electron gone wild.

Identity, as we have already noted, is a philosophical and psychological concept, whereas signature is a gesture of writing. Like the "w" in the title of *Whoroscope*, rendering a rebellious force – in spite of its silence at the heart of the Word – quite visible, the swerving between poles in Beckett's work can be seen as the writer's "signature". Jacques Derrida has commented on Beckett's signature, which he defines, when extracting some "significant" lines from the latter's texts, as being what "remains when the thematics is exhausted" (Derrida 1992, 61). For him, what remains is a certain rhythm. Stephen Thomson very astutely links this defining rhythm to that of *Footfalls*, implicitly associating it with the to-and-fro movement enacted on the stage. He reminds us that "May's pacing, as Beckett insisted, is the 'essence' of *Footfalls*" (Thomson 2010, 66). But Thomson goes one step further in linking the rhythm to a kind of struggle between meaning and disruption of meaning. He reminds us of the book co-authored by Derrida and Bennington and describes its rhythm almost in the

same terms used by Beckett to express his desire in *Godot* to avoid at all costs definition. He affirms that the “situation” described in Derrida’s commentary “is rather reminiscent of the wager set up with Geoffrey Bennington in the co-authored *Jacques Derrida*”: “Derrida’s part will be to struggle against being reduced to a matrix of ideas by pitching his writing in a way that will lead the reader constantly in doubt as to whether an anecdote or phrase is a matter of biographical ephemera, or of high philosophical import” (*Ibid.*, 77). Ideas are put in doubt, and that is basically the commanding rhythm of Beckett’s work. It is exactly what we find in Beckett’s inaugural poem, most notably in the *unword* of its title that pits sounds against sense. The “representation” chosen by Beckett to illustrate this clash is the struggle, in which sounds play a decisive role, between the *whore* and the *logos*.

The pun involving the whore seems to *represent* the first “fundamental sound” in Beckett’s work. Daniela Caselli has recently highlighted the role of *nothing* in the interpretation of the author’s work. She welcomes the critics who, “focusing on how the human occurs in Beckett under the sign of disavowal, see nothingness as a part of subjectivity unable to coincide with itself” (Caselli 2010, 8). Just as in Beckett’s early commentary on Joyce where Vice and Virtue are seen as two rebellious forces, nothingness becomes a force which defies the Logos and disavows identity. At the beginning of the writer’s career, nothingness is first envisioned as a category of meaninglessness, which is a linguistic and a logical category. As the Logos comes under attack, the concept of identity disappears. In the course of Beckett’s investigation – which increasingly resembles that of a trial – objects lose their definition and become, in Molloy’s words, “nameless things”. It is then worth noting that the *nothing* which Beckett will explore in his later work has its first *echo* in the fundamental sound of the “whore”.

One last remark. When Beckett explains his intention in conceiving *Endgame* to Alan Schneider, he seems dissatisfied with the success obtained by *Godot* and hopes, as he says, that his new text will have more power to “claw” (Beckett 1983, 107). The French word for the substantive “claw” is “*griffe*”. Since, at this stage of Beckett’s career, the writer speaks explicitly of fundamental sounds, we may assume that the sounds which swirl in his consciousness – as well as in his unconscious – spring from English and French alike. It just so happens that one of the meanings of “*griffe*” in French is that of a *signature* expressed by a special mark of identity. According to the *Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Française* (Robert), Flaubert used this word in that very sense to express a mark of personality in someone’s work (“*marque de la personnalité de quelqu’un dans ses œuvres*”). Beckett has certainly left his “*griffe*”, and made it felt. The pun in *Whoroscope*, the hobnail boot in *Godot* and the drama of Hamm in *Endgame* – for the fascination with the latter name may spring just as equally from the “sound” of the *cogito* as from the battered identity of the banished biblical character, the one being to a certain extent an echo of the other – may very well be examples of the writer’s *mark*. This mark, which Caselli calls the “sign of disavowal” of a subjectivity “unable to

coincide with itself”, becomes, when translated into its basic and somewhat resistant sonorous components, and listened to with care, the signature of Beckett’s swerving identity.

WORKS CITED

- ACKERLEY, C. J. and S. E. Gontarski, ed. 2004. *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*. New York : Grove Press.
- ACKERLEY, Chris. 2013. “Samuel Beckett : The Geometry of the Imagination.” In *Samuel Beckett : Debts and Legacies*, Peter Fifield and David Addyman, ed. 85-107. London: Bloomsbury.
- ADORNO, Theodor W. 1997. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Athlone Press.
- BECKETT, Samuel. 1983. *Disjecta*. Ruby Cohn, ed. London: John Calder.
- 1995. *Eleutheria*. Paris: Minuit.
- 2010. *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett, I-IV*, Paul Auster ed. New York: Grove Press.
- BENSON, Mary. 1987. “Blin on Beckett.” In *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*, Ruby Cohn ed., 26-28. London: Macmillan.
- BIZUB, Edward. 2012. *Beckett et Descartes dans l’œuf. Aux sources de l’œuvre beckettienne : de Whoroscope à Godot*. Paris: Classiques Garnier.
- BIZUB, Edward. 2013. “Beckett’s Boot : The Crux of Meaning.” In *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* n° 25, Jürgen Siess, Matthijs Engelberts and Angela Moorjani, eds., 267-278. Amsterdam : Rodopi.
- CASELLI, Daniela. 2010. “Beckett and nothing : trying to understand Beckett.” In *Beckett and Nothing*, edited by Daniela Caselli, 1-9. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. 1992. “This strange institution called littérature.” In *Acts of Literature*, Derek Attridge, ed. 33-75. London: Routledge.
- HERREN, Graley. 2013. “‘Stations of a Mourner’s Cross’ : Beckett, Killiney, 1954.” In *Samuel Beckett : Debts and Legacies*, Peter Fifield and David Addyman, eds. 109-131. London: Bloomsbury.
- REID, Alec. 1962. “Beckett and the Drama of Unknowing.” *Drama Survey*, vol. 2 (autumn), 130-138.
- THOMSON, Stephen. 2010. “‘A tangle of tatters’: ghosts and the busy nothing in *Footfalls*.” In *Beckett and Nothing*, Daniela Caselli ed., 65-83. Manchester : Manchester University Press.