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BECKETT MODERN / POSTMODERN

Introduction[1]

> "It only means that there will be a new form; and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now" (Samuel Beckett)

In 1986, at the climax of the critical debate on Modernism and Postmodernism, Hugh Kenner famously declared: "The last modernist is alive and well in Paris where he lives under the name of Beckett". Similarly, Anthony Cronin entitled his renowned 1996 biography *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist*. Such remarks were strongly contrasting previous or coeval definitions of Beckett as a postmodernist author, such as David Lodge's interpretation of Beckett as "the first important postmodernist writer", Lance Butler and Robin Davis's description of Beckett as "the poet of the poststructuralist age", or Ihab Hassam's marking the date of the publication of *Murphy* (1938) as the beginning of the postmodernist era.[2]

Such well-known definitions and categorizations were essentially instrumental for many critics and theorists who were either trying to analyze Beckett's protean and multifaceted oeuvre, or trying to clearly define the often unclear and blurred boundaries between the two (often overlapping) literary movements. Much of the recent scholarship on Beckett, however, still presents references to the topic[3], thus demonstrating that the Irish author's poetics and aesthetics still defy any ultimate or definite categorization, since their very nucleus precisely resides in the impossibility to

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[2] For a full account see Porter Abbott 1996 (23), and Moi 2005.

[3] For further readings see, among many, Caselli (2010); Moi (2005); Wagner (2003); Birkett and Ince (2000); Kennedy (1997); Cerrato (1993); Attridge (1992); Butler and Robin (1990); Kenner (1986); Lodge (1977).

be circumscribed in a single definition. As Ruben Moi argues, besides Beckett's implicit modernism, "the anti-establishment animus, solipsistic selves, self-imploding semiotics, and intriguing contingences of Beckett's texts activate the interrogations of language and identity of Lacan's neo-Freudian psycholinguistics, and the Nietzschean power analysis of Foucault and deconstruction of Derrida" (Moi, 2005). As a matter of fact, in an interview with Derek Attridge, Derrida himself revealed his affiliation to Beckett by affirming that the writer's "texts are self-deconstructive and make the limits of our language tremble" (Moi, 2005). As Wagner then maintains, Beckett's works "published after 1969 are mostly meta-literary attempts that must be read in light of his own theories and previous works and the attempt to deconstruct literary forms and genres". Moreover, the critic continues, "Beckett's last text published during his lifetime, *Stirrings Still* (1988), breaks down the barriers between drama, fiction, and poetry, with texts of the collection being almost entirely composed of echoes and reiterations of his previous work [...] He was definitely one of the fathers of the postmodern movement in fiction which has continued undermining the ideas of logical coherence in narration, formal plot, regular time sequence, and psychologically explained characters" (Wagner 2003, 194).

Any attempt at univocally defining Beckett's styles and experiments on literary language proves undoubtedly partial and, thanks to recent scholarly work, we are now used to thinking of Beckett as one of the most exemplary writers whose oeuvre continuously puts into the foreground the overlapping of the discourses of both modernism and postmodernism. In Beckett, the two are not to be conceived as dichotomist concepts or currents but rather as two ambivalent forces and/or features which are both enlightening interpretive modes, thus creating a progressive and inexhaustible virtuous circle of knowledge. As such, still nowadays Beckett's unique peculiarities in forms and contents require diverse critical analysis and methodological approaches in order to reflect and investigate on his intentions as a writer and as an experimentalist.

It is precisely in this light that the *Centro Studi Arti della Modernità* of the University of Turin organized a conference in November 2013 entitled *Samuel Beckett. Modern/Postmodern*. Its aim was to gather researchers from different countries who showed various scholarly and critical approaches to Beckett, so as to reveal how the impossibility of such a dichotomist labeling still somehow informs our understanding, perception, and critical analysis of Beckett, in a fruitful and stimulating manifold inquiry that embraces difference as its most precious value. The papers delivered at the conference, which are collected in this issue of *CoSMo*, reflected such a methodological variety and they insightfully covered a wide range of topics concerning those themes and styles that Beckett expressed and recreated in his very diverse works and genres. As this issue of the journal shows, Beckett is analyzed and discussed according to several critical methods, ranging from Genetic Criticism to Generative Linguistics (embracing

linguistics and literary criticism), Philosophy, Close Reading, Translation Studies and Criticism, and Comparative Literature.

In the essay that opens the collection, ("'The Rip Word' and Tattered Syntax. From 'the word go' to 'the word begone'"), Ann Banfield applies her invaluable critical method that confidently embraces Linguistics, Critical Theory and Philosophy and that has already informed and shaped her long-term and well-known research. Banfield draws on Generative Linguistics and, more specifically, on the works by Chomsky and Emonds, in order to further reflect on Beckett's late linguistic choices. Starting with a close analysis of Beckett's "brotherly likes", those seemingly infinite patterns of "generation and reproduction" that inform all of Beckett's oeuvre, Banfield examines Beckett's "ronde syntaxique" (syntactic circle or syntactic round) and the close relationship between words and images in his work, as well as his Ur-image of the clouds parting at sunset. This "introduces the new matter of loss, lessness, of a movement not in rounds but worstward, not Joyce's 'the seim anew' but change, although for the worst". The expressions "the rip word" and "from the word gone to the word begone", subsequently, allow Banfield to further consider all the occurrences of the word "figment" and to plausibly connect it to the word "fragment". This brings about reflection upon both Coetzee's interpretation of Beckett's images and the theories by Descartes, Berkeley and even Roland Barthes. Banfield underlines the fragmentariness of the images and of the language in a manner that seems quite novel in Beckett's criticism, namely by linguistically (as well as philosophically) analyzing them in connection to Beckett's syntax and lexis. Thanks to the close readings of numerous passages from several works by Beckett, Banfield thus illustrates his compositional method and focuses on the "tattered syntax" that is meta-narratively expressed in *All Strange Away*. Beckett, she claims, seems to have "intuited the leveling of syntax to the 'Maximal Projections' of Noam Chomsky". His language, in fact, mainly consists of "the closed-class, i.e. non-productive 'grammatical' or functional categories such as determiners, quantifiers, pronouns as well as inflectional morphemes like tense and plural and the bound morphemes of derivational morphology, as well as most prepositions". These categories form what Emonds called the "Syntacticon" (as opposed to the "Dictionary" of open-class, productive lexical categories like nouns or adjectives). The analysis specifically concentrates on Beckett's use of prepositions, of bound morphemes, and on those words which "play no role in derivational morphology". Directional prepositions are finally linked to Beckett's quantifiers ("little" and "less") and comparatives. Such a thought-through analysis is thus able to shed further and insightful light on Beckett's "mélange de privation et d'infini" (as expressed by Cioran, quoted in the essay), as well as on the "changelessness of the round of sames and the change lessward/worstward".

The theme (and literary method) of fragmentariness is also to be found in the second essay of the collection, "Beckett, Dante and the Archive", by Daniela Caselli, which analyses a number of both published and unpublished texts by Beckett where

Dante is quoted or referred to. By drawing on both close reading and genetic criticism, Caselli provides a revealing and resourceful view on the laboratory itself of Beckett's writing and the way (as well as the reasons why) Beckett used to manipulate and re-mould his literary sources in his works. Starting with a brief account of Dante's reception in English Literature, Caselli points out how in Beckett we do not only find the general idea of a "modernist Dante" seen as a linguistic innovator but also, and somehow most poignantly, as the "promise of keeping Dante 'out of sight'". Caselli takes into account all the editions of the *Divine Comedy* Beckett owned and she focuses on the "horrid Salani Edition" ("beslubbered with grotesque notes", as Beckett had it) as one of his main sources (as opposed to the Del Lungo Edition), as it is evident from both the *Whoroscope Notebook* and the *Dream Notebook*. Such a genetic approach allows Caselli to reflect on how Beckett employed Dante in his works and to question notions of authority by especially focusing on what she defines "the see-saw movement between effacement and presence, between wasteful and valuable material". According to the critic, in fact, "archival holdings can help us understand the role of scraps, residua, and odds and ends in Beckett while helping us to refocus our questions around literary value and authority". That is the reason why, following Caselli's argument, Beckett can be seen as an "archivist author": the scraps and the notebooks do not "simply document his intellectual development", but "what is claimed to have been lost (del Lungo) and what claimed to be worthless (Salani) construct a model of the *oeuvre as archive*" (my emphasis), a kind of writing made of, as Caselli argues by following Beckett's words and expressions, "'odds and ends', 'disjecta', 'residua', 'fizzles', 'foirades', and 'abandoned work[s]'".

Caselli's essay is then followed by Edward Bizub's "Sounds, Sense and Signature: Beckett's Swerving Identity", which offers a stimulating investigation of Beckett's "particular exploitation of sounds" as they especially appear in the names "Hamm" and "Godot", and in the pun of the title of *Whoroscope*. By drawing on Beckett's letters and by offering close readings of several passages, Bizub convincingly establishes a connection between sounds and "signature" (drawing on Derrida) as a source of identity or of "the impossibility of any attempt at a precise definition of the character's identity" in Beckett, namely in what Daniela Caselli describes, as Bizub reports, as a kind of "nothingness" which reflects "a subjectivity unable to coincide with itself".

The theme of "the modernist or postmodernist subject, or of subjectivity *tout court*" also informs Keir Elam's essay "'These old P.M.s are gruesome': Post-mortem Poetics in Beckett's Late Plays". The critic examines Beckett's affiliation with the concept of lateness and lastness and he offers an original reading of *What Where* by focusing on its "enigmatic" opening line "we are the last five". Later on in the essay, Elam analyzes the same "rip word" we found in Ann Banfield's essay, as well as the expressions "switch off", "go", "gone" and "rock off", so as to result in a critical perspective that enriches our vision of Beckett's post-mortem poetics: Beckett's figures, as Elam contends, "are post-human to the extent that they are posthumous, in the etymological sense of last, or of

coming after (from *posterus*, posterior), after death, perhaps after the death of the world, or after the death of humanity, of the very possibility of subjectivity and are thus beyond the sphere of human agency".

Elam's essay is followed by another essay which, on a thematic level, also presents death and the final passage(s) as its main core of meaning. In her "Grave Action: Last Rites in Brecht's *Mother Courage* and Beckett's *Endgame*", Martina Kolb reflects on the theme as it is differently, or somewhat/sometimes similarly, recreated by the two playwrights. She shows how Beckett and Brecht deal with the themes and the images of "ailing, dying and dead body, with shrouding, burying, and mourning". Kolb's comparative analysis allows her to re-discover issues which are then further elucidated, such as Brecht's famous de-familiarization. According to Kolb, "Brecht's de-familiarization does not apply to Beckett" but at the same it time it does, since "his characters counter pain, death, and alienation [...] thus rendering their existence bearable in their own way of tragicomic distancing".

The last section of the volume features three essays which, again, make us consider afresh Beckett's oscillating poetics. In Federico Bellini's lucid and refined analysis of habit ("'Der Mench [sic] ist ein Gewohnheitstier': Beckett and Habit"), the theme of habit is firstly linked to identity itself, which, according to Beckett is "just a form of habit, nothing more than a convention". Bellini proceeds by reassessing previous criticism on the theme and, finally, he weaves it together with the philosophical speculation of Félix Ravaisson and Maine de Biran. Through such a comparison, Bellini offers a new reading of *All Strange Away* and convincingly suggests that habit seems "to point towards a more positive and less reductive view than Proust's, showing significant similarities to Ravaisson's theories" or, even, to "re-invent Maine de Biran's idea of active habit as the condition of freedom as well as Ravaisson's treatment of habit as the interplay between freedom and nature, without which neither of the two could actually be".

Andrea Guiducci's reflection on *Impromptu d'Ohio* ("Vers une présénce tangentielle") shows, once more but with a difference, how modernist and postmodernist poetics are continually interlaced in Beckett. Guiducci's strong and nuanced theoretical analysis of the work demonstrates how Beckett's poetics is not only rooted on failure or on closure but rather it affirms some kind of presence which is to be retraced in the presence of the word itself, "une parole à la première personne qui en impose la présence".

Finally, the volume's last essay, by Chiara Simonigh, is devoted to Beckett's *Film* ("Around and About the Look") and it serves the purpose of highlighting Beckett's multifaceted poetics and his continuous urge to turn to different media and modes of expression. By drawing on the traditional scholarship of Film Studies, Simonigh makes us further consider, from a different perspective, the importance of *Film* in Beckett's oeuvre, so as to offer, together with the other essays, a panoramic view of Beckett's many-sided artistic production.

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