

CoSMo

Comparative
Studies
in Modernism

N. 5 • 2014 | 2281-6658



Beckett Modern / Postmodern

a cura di
Federico Sabatini

 **CENTRO STUDI**
ARTI DELLA MODERNITÀ

UNIVERSITÀ
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CoSMo Comparative Studies in Modernism
n. 5 • 2014

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CONTATTI sito web: <http://www.ojs.unito.it/index.php/CoSMO/>
e-mail: cosmo@unito.it
© 2011 Centro Studi "Arti della Modernità"
ISSN: 2281-6658

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FOCUS

BECKETT MODERN / POSTMODERN

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Federico SABATINI

FEDERICO SABATINI

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 topic³, 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

¹ I wish to thank Prof. Giuliana Ferreccio for her priceless support and help during the final editing of the proofs, as well as the editorial board of *CoSMo* and, in particular, Dr Roberto Merlo for his generous willingness to help during the formatting process.

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 remould 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 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 Mensch [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 présence 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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ANN BANFIELD

THE “RIP WORD” AND TATTERED SYNTAX:

From “the word go” to “the word begone”.

Samuel Beckett once described an early poem as “the work of a very young man with nothing to say and the itch to make.” (Harvey 1970b: 273). Beckett may have been recalling the 1934 review which found *More Pricks Than Kicks* “uninformed by any real passion or direction” and “[t]he author’s skill not hiding the fact that Mr. Beckett has nothing to say”, even if Beckett, the reviewer says, “read James Joyce with loving care”.¹ Critics discount Beckett’s severe self-criticism. “The Beckett of today”, Harvey pronounces, is “severe in his judgment of the young poet in his twenties” (1970: 273); “it is less clear” with hindsight the young “author had ‘nothing to say’”, John Piling protests (1999: 15). But linguistic fabrications without content long preoccupied Beckett. In “Recent Irish Poetry” (1934), those he dubbed “our leading twilighters” (1984a: 71) —including W. B. Yeats—were “beyond the jewels of language”, he wrote. “At the centre there is no theme”, adding “and without a theme there can be no poem, as witness”. Yeats’s exclamation: “What, be a singer born and lack a theme!”. The mocking tone targets both the poet with a gift to no purpose and the need for a theme.

The itch to make was what drove Beckett on, not something he wanted to say. The ostensible *raison d’être* of the early works was the display of linguistic cleverness. This passion for manipulating language was surely what drew Beckett to Joyce. “Bon qu’à ça”, he famously declared when asked why he wrote—“good for nothing else.” The pithy statement was also the admission of a gift which was the only talent Beckett felt the urge to use. Yet toward it he felt a *méfiance*: was it facile virtuosity, like the “competence that must be most painful to him” Beckett attributes to André Masson

¹ Quoted in Allen 2004.

(1984a: 140)?² One of those “things about himself he didn’t like” Beckett alluded to Herbert Blau must have been that facility, giving rise to the same self-loathing when it comes to his writings, aside from his epitaph, *First Love’s* speaker feels. “My other writings are no sooner dry than they revolt me, but my epitaph still meets with my approval” (1974a: 12). For the early work is studded with “jewels of language”, despite Beckett’s struggle to produce “nudist” writing (his label for Yeats’ in “A Coat” (1984a: 71) or, at best, to wear a “low-church . . . surplice” (2009a: 134-5). He was paralyzed in fear of exposing himself in verbal nullity, his one gift a linguistic talent to no purpose.

These “crises de négation” (1984a 37) would be erected into a kind of credo in “Three Dialogues”: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with an obligation to express” (1984a: 139). The absence of a subject became a kind of subject. “The subject doesn’t matter, there is none” (1958: 354). The itch to write first found its missing subject in the style’s endless reiterations of the conviction there was nothing worth doing but saying and nothing to be said not already said. This is the theme of generation as the reproduction of like by like, Beckett’s “brotherly likes,” in the potentially infinite series of “my earth and my father’s and my mother’s and my father’s fathers . . .” (1953a: 46-7). Such series are everywhere in Beckett. Their burden is that there is nothing new under the sun, as *Murphy’s* opening insists, no individual not submerged by the generic. The round of generations is also a theory of language and literary history. Every new writer is condemned to “keep on saying the same old thing, generation after generation” (1958: 376). Much of the middle style derives its humor and energy from the attempt to exhaust such series in what Beckett names “une sorte de ronde syntaxique” (1984a: 125), seemingly empty linguistic exercises whose content demonstrates this theme.

But after the trilogy, another subject emerged, what *A Piece of Monologue* calls the matter of “the dead and gone”. It takes form late with *How It Is* and the appearance of “the image”. Beckett distinguishes his images from those “not for the eyes made of words” (1964: 45); his are “the kind I see sometimes in the mud” (1964: 11), but *seen* not by the outer eyes, always blue, but by “my eyes not the blue the others at the back” (1964: 8). *Ill Seen Ill Said* speaks of “this filthy eye of flesh” (65) and “an eye having no need of light to see.” (50) It closes to see within.

The images, flashing in the light to one in the mud (*How It Is*) and the dark (*Company*), consist of “little scenes” (1964: 97) in which appear the speaker’s mother, his younger self and glimpses of Ireland. By contrast with the dim grey light, their flashes of light come and go intermittently, suddenly and unpredictably to the inner

² “S’agit-il de voir dans *Whoroscope* et, partant, dans l’œuvre à venir le prestige d’une virtuosité linguistique hors pair ou les stigmates d’une entreprise mortifère ?” (Bizub, 2012 : 284).

eyes without being called up at will, involuntary images of the past. Ultimately, they are reduced to one *Ur*-image: that of clouds parting at sunset —“too late”—to reveal a bit of blue sky, designated by a kind of short hand: “a little blue in the mud . . . little scenes skies especially” (1964: 76), “life above in the light a little blue little scenes” (1964 127). *Watt*’s opening already invokes “These northwestern skies. . . . really extraordinary. . . . You think it is all over and then pop! Up they flare, with augmented radiance” (1953a: 15). This late-breaking sky, Beckett’s madeleine, comes to encapsulate Ireland, stripped by forgetfulness of every other association—politics, history, personal associations—and reduced to its minimal, memorable core, in *Murphy* to “all she [Celia] remembered of Ireland.” (280). Hence the resonance for Beckett of Yeats’s lines from “The Tower”: “but the clouds of the sky/When the horizon fades”.³

The image introduces the new “matter” of loss, of lessness, of a movement not in rounds but worstward, not Joyce’s “the seim anew” but change, although for the worse. In *How It Is*’s French original, dispelling the illusion that “cher Pim” (1961 114) will “come back” or “another will come better than Pim” (1964 23) in the endless procession of Pims and Boms, the evocation of “Pim disparu” (1961 81) recalls Proust. Particular members of the series may be irrevocably lost, hence unique. The revelation of this possibility provides the strange antidote for the paralysis arising from the idea that nothing new ever appears, that there is nothing to say that hasn’t already been said.

The first theme never wholly disappears; it continues as a *basso continuo*, counterpoint to the burden of loss; the images appear above the procession of Pim substitutes. The two form twinned “matters”, two variations on saying something about nothing, captured by the dantesque geography of *How It Is*, *Company* and the little text *Lessness*. On the one side, the dim world and the pared-down landscape of the one in the dark of the present, where all is unchangingly the same: white ashes, cloudless grey sky, no stirrings, no alternation of light, calm. On the other side, changing skies—clouds, rain and blue, night and day—, change of loves, stirrings, all the images represent. The blue of sky is never presented as changeless (this is not a Mediterranean world); only the grey cloudless sky is: Beckett describes voluntary memory as “the past in monochrome” (1957b: 19); the images present a colored past. It is a changing Irish sky, not Paris’s “ciel bas et lourd”—hence rain and blue are conjugated. Changelessness spells ennui, spleen, according to the author of *Proust*, but also the calm of a calnative. Change brings untranquilized “suffering,” yet “opens a window on the real” (1957b: 16). As the author of *Proust* put it, the pendulum swings between boredom and suffering. “On the one hand embers. On the other ashes.” (1996: 72). Ashes hide

³ Marjorie Perloff (2007) claims that, removed from Yeats’s poem, Beckett’s use of “but” changes Yeats’ meaning of “only” to “a disclaimer”. But in Beckett’s late work, “but” as “only” predominates.

embers, something that once was, something colored, stirring still, if only barely, the flare of the image in the mud.

There comes the point when the first matter—“Thirty thousand nights of ghosts beyond” joining the endless procession of sames—is subsumed by the second and the voice of *A Piece of Monologue* pronounces: “Waiting on the rip word. . . . Treating of other matters. Trying to treat of other matters. Till half-hears there are no other matters. Never were other matters. Never two matters. Never but the one matter. The dead and gone. The dying and going. From the word go. The word begone.” (1984b: 269).

To the one lying in the dark, the question is: are the images, signs of a changing world, merely “figments comfortless” (*Company*: 40)? For only the unchanging stasis in the present indubitably exists—the *cogito* is obligatorily present tense. Gontarski, invoking Beckett’s “anti-empiricism”, posits “the rejection of the ‘verifiability’ of immediate knowledge since in Beckett’s fictive world all is re-presentation” (1996: xxi). But what is immediately present in the closed-space and grey light in which the deviser devises needs no verification. *Company*’s opening makes this point: “Only a small part of what is said can be verified. As for example when he hears, You are on your back in the dark. Then he must acknowledge the truth of what is said. But by far the greater part of what is said cannot be verified. As for example when he hears, You first saw the light on such and such a day” (1996: 3). What calls for verification are such statements, what Gontarski’s “re-presentations”, the after-images of past experience, testify to. Beckett’s “reason-ridden” (1996: 24) imagination seeks this verification. The images of life in the light by contrast with stasis in the dark are uncertain wills-of-the-wisp, subject to doubt: “Ghost light. Ghost nights. Ghost rooms. Ghost graves. Ghost . . . he all but said ghost loved ones” (1984b: 269). Determining whether they are figments is a Cartesian project: to combine two propositions, one past, the other present—“You first saw the light on such and such a day and now you are on your back in the dark”—“perhaps from the incontrovertibility of the one to win credence for the other” (1996: 3). This marks the cogitations of the insomniac in the dark as indubitable by contrast with a past event, subject to doubt.

“Figment,” typically restricted to the phrase “figment of the imagination”,⁴ suggests something unreal, created by the mind. Deleuze uses the phrase “Faire une image”, quoting the last line of “L’Image”: “c’est fait j’ai l’image” (1992: 71). But “faire” is not equivalent to “est fait”. Bruno Clément notes that “L’Image”’s last line is corrected a few months later in *Comment c’est* to “j’ai eu l’image”, pronouncing the change a “Différence

⁴ It is a Berkeleyan word, appearing in “figments of the mind” in the 1744 *Siris* to assert the realism of Plato’s ideas, e.g., goodness, beauty, realer than the fleeting objects of sense and interestingly not for physical objects. *Watt*’s “figments of the id” (59) connects figments to the real.

énorme” passing “d’une théorie de l’imagination active à une théorie de l’imagination passive.” (2008: 27). But the passive reading is already in the first version’s passive voice.

Some things are incontrovertibly pronounced figments. The English *Company* makes “figment” the complement of “devise”: “Devising figments to temper his nothingness” (1996: 33)—the fictional “creatures” M and W seem intended. The French *Compagnie* translates “figments” here as “chimères” (1980: 62-3), suggesting not conscious making but something monstrous the mind produces unconsciously. “Chimères” (24) also is translated as “imaginings” in *Ill Seen Ill Said* (65).

Most critics accept the word “figment” as Beckett’s definitive assertion about the images. Peter Boxall equates it with “story”: “the figment of a life up above in the light” is “a story that is told to Pim by the voice” (2009b: 102). Clément writes that “Beckett imagine des fictions, des scénarios, des images”, blurring the distinctions that he claims Beckett is careful to make. J. M. Coetzee, in his elegant analysis of *Lessness*’s random order, hesitates with a “perhaps”: “The blank walls and white light of the earlier tomb/womb existence are ‘all gone from mind’ and perhaps only after all ‘figments.’ . . . day and night, the only events to differentiate a world of stasis. But this pair as well, ‘figment dawn dispeller of figments and the other called dusk’ . . . , is suspected of being not events out there but events . . . of imagining consciousness.” Coetzee, speculating that “the first half of *Lessness*” gives “figments of day and the second . . . figments of night, or vice versa”, concludes that “the two halves of the book reciprocally cancel each other, and we are left with a fiction of net zero . . . traces of a consciousness elaborating and dismissing its own inventions” (1973: 198).

But instead of the dismissal of the grey present and lighted past as all equally fictions—the present is not subject to doubt—; it is the status of a past which is in question—not solely that of blank walls and light but the landscape of blue sky and cloud. *Lessness*’s two refrains “Never was but . . .” and “he will . . .” alternately assert the sole existence of an unchanging present in soundless, grey air and predict change “under the changing skies” (1995: 165). From within the grey world of the present, all change seems “figment”, “vanished dream”, “imaginings”: “figment the passing light”, “Figment light never was but grey air timeless” (1995: 197, 199), “Never but in vanished dream the passing hour” (198), “Never but silence such that in imagination this wild laughter these cries” (199), “Never but imagined the blue in a wild imagining the blue celeste of poesy” (201). Change, inexistent in the present, is evoked in the future—“will”—, equivalent to an implicit past—“will . . . again”. “He will curse God again as in the blessed days face to the open sky the passing deluge”; “it will be day and night again”; “Old love new love as in the blessed days unhappiness will reign again.” The past returns as the quintessential image/memory—“the blue celeste”, “stir in the sky”, “On him will rain again as in the blessed days of blue the passing cloud” (197: 199).

Ill Seen Ill Said explicitly questions the word *figment*'s adequacy to the images. “Things and imaginings” are “all confusion”. That her image is mere figment is presented as a wish contrary to fact: “If only she could be pure figment. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else. . . . Cooped up there with the rest. Hovel and stones. The lot. And the eye. How simple all then. If only all could be pure figment. Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be” (1996: 58).

The images occur in “the madhouse of the skull”, translation of “le manicomme du crâne” in *Mal vu mal dit* (1981: 24). It picks up the phrase “La folle du logis” (1981: 21) a few pages earlier, “le nom que Malebranche donne à l’imagination”, Clément notes, adding that *Mal vu mal dit* is “une réflexion sur l’imagination d’une rigueur . . . exemplaire”. Clément takes the phrase to refer to the text’s old woman (2008: 28). But Clément’s rigor is less than Beckett’s: the translation of “La folle du logis s’en donne à coeur chagrin”—“Imagination at wit’s end spreads its sad wings” (1996 56)—confirms the phrase designates not the old woman but imagination.⁵ The madwoman imagination occupies the madhouse of the skull. If the old woman is “cooped up there” too, the nagging question remains: is she thereby pure figment?

For if the old woman is not outside the mind, she is not necessarily created by it. Coetzee thinks the images are “not events out there but events . . . of imagining consciousness”. “Events” captures their mind-independent appearance; even if they appear *in* the mind, they are not consciously “made up” or willed. *Seen* inwardly, with the inner eyes, they have the “adventitiousness” both Descartes and Berkeley attribute to sense-data. The images are not fictions, but sense-data first registered distractedly that re-present themselves after a lapse of time. *Fizzle 2* explains: “It is in the outer space, not to be confused with the other, that such images develop.” (1995: 230). The “offal of experience” (1957b: 59) furnishes the material for the images, just as the time wasted in the salons furnishes Proust’s material.

The figments consciously produced by the mind—e.g., *Company*'s “creatures”—are, in fact, calmatives. By contrast, the ghostly fragments arising involuntarily from an unknown source, because not indubitably figments,⁶ are thereby endowed with the ability to disturb habit which Beckett saw as the property of Proust’s involuntary memory. “Not possible any longer except as figment. Not endurable”, *Ill Seen Ill Said* asserts (1996: 65), admitting they are less threatening if thought figments. The eye seeks some calmative to shut out the images’ uncontrollable, panic-causing comings and goings: “close eye calm long last all gone from mind” (1995: 198). Yet their disturbance can reveal the new, the real. The images not as hallucinations but as

⁵ See Cohn 2001: 367, which also gives the correct reading.

⁶ Cf. “Dead or alive, fact or fiction, ‘elle’ hovers between the two” (Cohn 2001: 367).

fragments of the past alternatively makes them “the only Paradise that is not the dream of a madman, the Paradise that has been lost” (1957b: 55).

The images as seen not devised explains the role of the eye in *Ill Seen Is Said* and the camera “eye (E)” in *Film* (1984b: 163). The model for these texts structured by an observing eye is surely the scene in *La Recherche* Beckett cites in which Proust’s narrator first hears his grandmother’s “strange real voice,” (1957b: 15) on the telephone and later, unobserved, observes her reading. In this inhabital moment, “he realizes with horror that his grandmother is dead, that the cherished familiar” created by habit is now a “mad old woman,”—Beckett echoes Proust in calling Molloy’s mother “this deaf blind impotent mad old woman” (1958: 15), as he later echoes his own paraphrase of Proust, the “carefully arranged mask of” the grandmother’s “features” (1957b: 15) in “How serene it seems this ancient mask. . . . Worthy those worn by certain newly dead” (1996: 62). Suddenly the original progenitor, far from being one of a sequence of anonymous mothers and mother’s mothers, becomes “a stranger whom he has never seen” (1957b: 15) with “the essence of a unique beauty” (1957b: 72) and hence cruelly irreplaceable.

The image is strangely detached—“each one is kept at its distance” (1957b: 550)—, as if the image were the mirror of an original perception which, like a Medusa head, cannot be gazed at directly but only through the lens of time, Proust’s telescope: “life in the light first image some creature or other I watched him . . . from afar through my spy-glass sidelong in mirrors through windows” (1964: 9). In Beckett’s words on Proust’s narrator, from the distance of time “he suffers with her whom he had not seen suffer, as though, for him as for Françoise, . . . who cannot restrain her tears when informed that there has been an earthquake in China, pain could only be focussed at a distance” (1957b: 30). “I never see nor write to nor hear from nor am seen by Ethna MacC. now”, Beckett wrote Thomas McGreevy. “‘Tis better thus!”, he continued, “I incline to the opinion that when it is not possible to see people simply it is more satisfactory to wait till they turn up in the memory. I can’t see her and I can’t imagine her. Occasionally it happens that I remember her and then, presto!” (2009a: 135) The inner eye can gaze its fill only when the object is an image beyond embrace, beyond exchange of words, when the “only true Paradise” is a lost one (1957b: 25-6).

The images, then, are internal pictures of those no longer present before “the eye of flesh” restored in flashes to the “other” eye (1996: 56). The familiar mother was “the caricature furnished by direct perception” (4); the stranger, irrevocably gone, is revealed “as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family” (1957b: 11). “She shows herself only to her own. But she has no own. Yes yes she has one. And who has her” (1996 53). Roland Barthes sought the essence of the dead mother in a photo, in the process breaking with the Barthes of “L’Effet du Réel” and discovering “[t]he photograph is literally the emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here” (1981: 80). Beckett’s

image similarly presents itself directly to the other eye. “It restores . . . more because less, more because it abstracts the useful, the opportune, the accidental, . . . and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal—the real” (1957b: 20). “You lie in the dark with closed eyes and see the scene. As you could not at the time” (1996: 27). But the gulf between “was there” and “is here” is cruelly and perhaps mercifully for Beckett unbridgeable. In “...but the clouds...,” the image testifies that she who is lost had once been there: “For had she never once appeared, all that time, would I have, could I have, gone on begging”? (260) The object of this perception is the appearance only of a physical body long gone. The eerie twist on Berkeley’s *esse est percipi (aut percipere)* is that the one caught by the “scruting” eye persists in existing as long as perceived by a kind of paradox—“the dead are only dead in so far as they continue to exist in the heart of the survivor” (1957b: 29). But the one that sees, prisoner of the act of *percipere* (1957b: 27) whose objects are the old woman’s unseeing “longed-for eyes” (1996: 62), albeit as spectral as she, feels “the despair of the spectator” she is spared (1957b: 29) of ever being seen.

The image captured on the photographic plate can be more or less permanently fixed, while the image fleetingly recorded on the retina can only with difficulty be re-accessed, can only be awaited: in “...but the clouds...,” “in the dark” M “began to beg, of her, to appear . . . a begging of the mind, to her, to appear” (1984: 260). If the image appears, it is solely to the one whose eye initially recorded it. It remains impossibly private, in no way “downloadable”, fragile, with a date of expiration. In *How It Is*, the images appear with a clarity they lose in the later works. “Ill half seen.” (1996: 54) “Winter evening. Not to be precise. All so bygone” (1996: 60), “at first sight ill seen and every year rather more so” (1996: 62-3). Their blurring is also a function of the eye, which mists, fills with tears: “Long this image till suddenly it blurs” (1996: 57). They also appear with decreasing frequency. “From one moment of the year to the next suddenly no longer there. . . . Then as suddenly there again” (56). Yet the images cannot be wiped out by “interpos[ing] my hand, or clos[ing] my eyes . . . or tak[ing] off my eyeglasses for them to fade” (1995: 230) or ripping them. They perish only with the beholder’s disappearance. “What is it defends her? Even from her own. Averts the intent gaze. . . Forbids divining her. What but life ending. Hers. The other’s. But so otherwise” (1996: 55-6). The skull which inters them finally empties.

If Pim turns out to be unique, irreplaceable—i.e. if no substitute is like Pim—, as also the mother of the images and the late-clearing Irish sky, then this discovery demands a language for the “widowed eye” unlike the “ronde[s] syntaxique[s]”, endlessly returning the same, asserting, then denying their propositions, canceling out their meaning as Coetzee thought the two parts of *Lessness* do. A syntax for which the “rip” word gives the key. While aware it refers to *requiescat in pace* abbreviated on a tombstone as R.I.P, critics have still speculated as to what word Beckett had in mind. “The rip word in *A Piece of Monologue* is ‘begone’”, Kristin Morrison thinks (1982:

349). Gontarski thinks a “pivotal word, what in ‘A Piece of Monologue’ is called ‘the rip word, in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is ‘less,’ in *Worstward Ho*, like *Company*, . . . is ‘gone’” (1996: xxv). In fact, there is no particular word but a kind of word of which these are examples and which functions to give the skeleton of syntax.

The verb “rip” in *A Piece of Monologue*—“Ripped off and torn to shreds”—suggests a principle of linguistic fragmentation. The line refers to photos once on the wall (the text links image and photo). In the “the mother-haunted *Ill Seen Ill Said*”, as Gontarski calls it (1996: xx), the “eye functions with the cruel precision of the camera” and “photographs the reality of” the old woman, as Beckett says Proust’s narrator’s eye does his grandmother (1957b: 15); in *Film* it is the son caught by the camera eye while, like the old woman, pouring over a photo album. In both *A Piece of Monologue* and *Film*, photos are torn to pieces, becoming akin to the “Scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines and colours evoking nothing” Murphy saw in his mind (1957a: 252). Ruby Cohn reported that Beckett “wrote his sixty different sentences [of *Lessness*] in six families, each family arising from an image” (Cohn 1973: 265). So, like *How It Is*’s syntax, *Lessness*’s fragments of language arise out of images, scraps of an ancient voice—auditory images heard in the skull—out of scraps of images. A connection between “figment” and “fragment” is established. Cohn recounts of *Lessness*’s composition that not only did its “sentences”—i. e., syntactic units punctuated by periods—originate in images, but that “Beckett wrote each of these sixty sentences on a separate piece of paper, mixed them all in a container, and then drew them out in random order twice” (Cohn 1973: 265). The earlier *All Strange Away* could have been similarly composed, and the “tattered syntaxes” (1995: 169), “syntaxes upended in opposite corners” (171), invokes also scraps of paper, akin to the “[t]housand shreds [of photos] under the bed with the dust and spiders.”⁷ (1984: 266). A syntax of fragments often less than full sentences, “Such bits and scraps” of images are “Seen no matter how and said as seen” (1996: 66); “the tattered sky”—the phrase appears in *Murphy* (1957a: 239)—accomplishes the break-up of *Watt*’s and the trilogy’s syntactic rounds.

These scraps of language are nonetheless well-formed bits of syntax. Here Beckett has intuited the leveling of syntax to the “Maximal Projections” of Noam Chomsky’s Bar Notation,⁸ where the sentence and the other phrasal categories share the same linguistic structure. The change to a style of scraps begins with *Waiting for Godot*, where broken dialogue replaces the monologues of the Trilogy. The dramas’ fragmented

⁷ “Sheets of black paper, stick them to the wall with cobweb and spittle” (1995: 170) suggests a connection.

⁸ See Chomsky 1986 and also Banfield 2013.

syntax then becomes that of the late prose monologues. Even the unpunctuated *How It Is* is tattered: the original manuscript of *Comment c’est* is punctuated like the later texts.⁹

Beckett’s diminutives “bits,” “scraps,” “bribes” and “tatters” capture another property of the late style. It is almost entirely pieced together out of a quite restricted part of the lexicon, that consisting 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. Emonds (2000, chapters 3, 4) calls this part of the lexicon “the Syntacticon,” in contrast to “the Dictionary” of open-class, productive lexical categories like nouns, adjective/(qualitative) adverbs, verbs and certain more complex prepositions (e.g., *alongside*, *on board*, *in case of*, *because of*, *downstairs*), Beckett’s “big words” (1995:103), categories for which new members can be coined. This division is inherited from structuralist grammars, but the Syntacticon adds to the functional words a restricted set of “semi-lexical categories”: grammatical nouns like *one*, *self*, *thing*, *body*, *place*, *time*, *way*,¹⁰ *other(s)*, verbs like *be*, *see*, *have*, *come*, *go*, *say*, adjectives/adverbs like *other*, *same*, *different*, *mere*, *good*, *bad*, *well*, *such*, *so* and prepositions like *to*, *for*, *of*, *with*, *out*, *up*, *by*, *on* etc.—actually, the familiar prepositions are grammatical ones.

In the *Wake*, Joyce exploited the Dictionary’s productive categories. The young Beckett imitated him in this. But in the late texts Gontarski calls “‘closed space’ tales” (1996: x), Beckett’s vocabulary is drawn almost exclusively from the closed-class categories, grammatical nouns and verbs like those above, and bound morphemes, adding another dimension to their fragmentariness. Starting with *Comment C’est /How It Is*, it is the repertoire of the Syntacticon that is exploited in titles like *All That Fall*, *Pour Finir Encore*, *assez* or *Enough*, *sans* or *lessness*, *Still*, *All Strange Away*, *Stirrings Still*, *Come and Go* and *Ill Seen Ill Said* with its light verbs, *Pas moi* or *Not I* and *Quoi où* or *What Where* and *Worstward Ho*.¹¹

The late style captures the matter of the rip word: loss, lessness, the recognition that something was and no longer is, something that escapes the round of generations. It is not a syntax “obéissant au seul principe de la combinatoire d’éléments ayant rompu presque tout lien avec le réel”, as Pascale Casanova insists (1997: 170). It aims rather to

⁹ Beckett resorted to other devices for fragmenting the syntax, as in his suggestions for the staging of one *Text for Nothing*: “Curtain up on speechless author (A) still or moving or alternately. Silence broken by recorded voice (V) speaking opening of text. A takes over. Breaks down. V again. A again. So on. Till text completed piecemeal” (1995: xvi).

¹⁰ Emonds envisions tests for semi-lexical categories. For instance, these first seven proposed grammatical nouns can occur with some or all the quantifiers *no*, *some*, *any*, *every* to form pronouns, e.g., *somebody*. Hence, one could write them with a hyphen: e.g. *-body*.

¹¹ These titles contain some Dictionary members: *fall*, *stirrings*, *strange*, *finir*.

ill-say the ill-seen images,¹² themselves fleeting encounters with the real. Nor is the late style about nothing, but about something so difficult to seize because so slight that a lessness of meaning is required, without its being completely meaningless. Emonds’s theory of the lexicon suggests the nature of Beckett’s minimalism of meaning. The closed-class categories lack the more specified semantic content of Dictionary members, having only minimally meaningful syntactic features. They are semantically “light.”

To capture the images of a past, the late style resuscitates a pre-conquest, i.e., pre-French English, as if Beckett went leastward and backwards in language, discarding all the accretions to the original Germanic vocabulary. For the English Syntacticon consists of a core, primary vocabulary whose origin is mostly Watt’s “venerable Saxon words” (1953a:143). Beckett’s attention to the differences between French and English detected via these minimal terms—Emonds claims that in decades of research on English and French, he has found but one pair of grammatical morphemes that are exact translations: *just/juste*—is the result of the distanced examination of English as a foreign tongue via another foreign tongue by one who, like Mrs. Rooney in *All that Fall*, “use[s] none but the simplest words,” yet sometimes found her “way of speaking very . . . bizarre”, leading Mr. Rooney to conclude she “were struggling with a dead language.” (1984b:34) So its author discovers the mother tongue, returned as “scraps of an ancient voice in me not mine” (1964 7) is, like “our own poor dear Gaelic” (1984b: 34), a *langue perdue*, with the irreplaceability of the mother and Pim. It has, like the voice in *Company*, the same “Flat tone unchanged” of “[a] mother’s stooping over cradle” (1996: 34-5) or of the grandmother on the telephone in Proust, “as impalpable as a voice from the dead” (1957b 15), become not the familiar mother tongue but one language among others, unique and foreign.

This tattered syntax is especially concentrated in the prepositions, which straddle the open- and closed class categories.¹³ The class of prepositions is so restricted that school children memorize them, a task clearly impossible for nouns, adjectives and verbs. The epitaph so admired by the speaker of *First Love* contains the line “Hereunder lies the above who up below” (1974a: 12), a translation of “Ci-gît qui y échappa tant/ Qu’il n’en échappe que maintenant”, which the narrator claims “illustre un point de grammaire” (1970a 9-10), namely the clitic pro-forms for prepositional phrases “y” and “en,” part of “a Primer of higher French syntax”, Beckett’s letter of 28 December, 1938, calls the verse (2009a 648).

¹² The “ill seen” is “of necessity, ill said”, Gontarski says (1996: xxii).

¹³ One reason prepositions seem like a “small” category is that they play no role in derivational morphology, i.e., one can’t turn them into nouns or verbs.

The syntactic “fragments” of the late work are frequently prepositional phrases, as below:

Close it [the eye] for good and all and see her to death. Unremittent. In the shack. Over the stones. In the pastures. The haze. At the tomb. And back” (1996: 65).

No wall toward which or from. No table back towards which or further from. In the same place as when paced from wall to wall all places as the same (1995: 261).

Beckett foregrounds especially the intransitive directional prepositions, e.g. “He ran out [the door]” / “he moved forward”, on the analogy with intransitive verbs: “he forgot [the eggs]” / “he sneezed.”¹⁴ Prepositions have the syntactic features \pm LOCATION and \pm PATH. Prepositions of PATH further divide into those of approach, +GOAL (*to, on, toward, into, etc.*) and those of source, -GOAL (*from, off, out of, etc.*). The “light” meaning emerging from Beckett’s minimalism is that of a directionality or “path” without movement, heading in a lessward direction: “stirring still” ever less and less but always just short of nothing. “I have never in my life been on my way anywhere, but simply on my way.” (1995: 156)

Beckett explores the parametric variations between English and French, where each is unique. Even when a French borrowing provides a cognate, Beckett invariably avoids it, as in translating “rebrousser chemin” (1976: 28) by “turning back” (1995: 225) and not by “retrace one’s steps” and “pas question d’y remonter” (*Comment C’est* :10) by “no going back up there” (1964 8), thus emphasizing the specifically English behavior of the prepositions. The translations of *re-* by English prepositions emphasize the similarity of certain functional categories, even when one is a bound and the other a free morpheme. Beckett seemed to detect “the complementary distribution between post-verbal particles (intransitive prepositions) and the English verbal prefix *re-*”, for Keyser and Roper (1992) evidence *re-* is a preposition “incorporated into the verb”. Thus, “John shipped (off) his prizes” vs “John reshipped (*off) his prizes” and “You should write (down) the response” vs “You should rewrite (*down) the response”. If *re-* is a preposition, “these examples follow from only one particle P being permitted per verb, as exemplified in “*Please put down the cat out” (Emonds 2000: 80).

The preposition *on* and its inverse *back* are given special prominence by Beckett: “no way on, no way back” (1974b: 62). Beckett had written to Barney Rosset: “I can’t

¹⁴ Traditional grammar treated prepositions like *out, back, forward, backward[s]*, as “directional adverbs” and those like *on* in “he went on” as verb “particles”. A test for the particles is their ability to undergo “particle movement” with the verb’s complements: cf. “He went on further” with “He went further on” by contrast with transitive prepositions with their noun phrase complements: “He lay on the bed” / “*He lay the bed on”.

get on go on get back” (1996: xvi). As a post-verbal particle, *on* is intransitive and directional. Beckett gives it continual scrutiny. In the famous ending of *The Unnamable*—“you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (1958: 414) — “go on” is a translation of the original French “continuer”: “il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, je vais continuer” (1953b 213), where there is no preposition. But in the novel’s opening, Beckett uses the same “go on”—“before going any further, any further on,” (1958: 291)—to translate “avant d’aller plus loin, de l’avant” (1953b: 8). Here, in foregrounding two French prepositional combinations of “de” and “avant”—“avant de” and “de l’avant”—Beckett discovers the peculiarities of English *on*. His isolating it from the verb points ahead to his later uses of it in isolation. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett had translated the command “En avant!” (1952: 152) as “On!” (1954: 57), a use attested in the OED. That bare “on” appears amidst other prepositions in the opening of *Worstward Ho*: “On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on” (1996: 89). Gontarski calls this “On” “the brief sentence that becomes the novel’s refrain,” claiming it “is folded into the pun ‘so on.’” (xv). We hear also the *on* of idioms like “He went on [and on] at length about it,” with the meaning of speaking continuously, as in the Irishism “go on with you.”

The verb particle *on* has a little noted property of allowing only a quantifier phrase complement. The evidence is that it has to be a comparative: “He went a little further on” is well-formed, but not “*He went very far on”, “a little way on.” See also, “He went on a little way further” but not “on a little way”. This is not the case with other intransitive particles: “He went very far out, down, in/out, down, in very far”.

The directional prepositions meet the other functional category Beckett favors, the quantifiers, notably the quantifiers like “little” and “less” and the comparatives. Watt’s reflections on the inflections *-er*, *-est*, the bound counterparts of the free morphemes *more/most*, located in them the semantic lightness Beckett sought. From seeing himself “so little, so poor” Watt proceeds to “littler, poorer,” then wonders “Was not that something?” Then from feeling “So sick, so alone”, he feels “Sicker, aloner. Was not that something? As the comparative is something. Whether more than its positive or less. Whether less than its superlative or more” (1953a: 148).

Beckett’s analysis of the comparative conforms to Jean-Claude Milner’s distinction between two forms of comparative. In one, the adjective forms part of the comparison, e.g., “his fleece was [as] white as snow”. In the other, only the quantifier or degree word, i.e., the functional category, is involved. In it, the adjectives may be different—“John is as courageous as Bill is intelligent” (1973: 44). Nor would it be a contradiction to add, “that is to say, not at all” (1973 40). This comparative does not necessarily predicate the quality the adjective designates. So asserting Watt is sicker than before is not necessarily to assert he is sick but only that however sick he was before, he is more so now. This is semantic lightness, but, as Watt knew, it is not nothing. “Least never to be nought.” The goal is “With leasening words say least best worse” (1996 106).

The Unnamable had pronounced *merde*, “le mot juste” (1953b: 131), the word that for Beckett reduces all to the circulation of likes, generation to the “strides of alimentation and defecation” (1954: 29). *Less* replaces it: “With what one word convey its change? Careful. Less. Ah the sweet one word. Less. It is less. The same but less. . . . To say the least. Less. It will end by being no more. By never having been.” (1996 81) The transformation of shit into lessness, a Dictionary word into a syntacticon member, unburdens “le mot juste” of semantic specificity and exchanges its affect from derisory humor and the continuous flow of the Unnamable’s tears to the later prose’s “deterioration of the sense of humour” (1964: 18) and the staring eye’s brief and sudden tears, like the sudden showers of a “passing cloud” in “the blessed days of blue.” *Blessed* that contains *less*.

Since the image-memory, subject itself to time, becomes ever slighter, the language must adopt its dwindling direction: the lessward direction of Beckett’s comparatives.¹⁵ The traditional term for quantifiers, especially the comparatives—“degree word”—suggests a kind of directionality: positive, comparative, superlative. The superlative of the grammatical adjective *bad* meets the directional preposition in one of the rare neologisms of the late prose. For “worstward”, Beckett discovered the one preposition for which new members can be coined, the bound morpheme *-ward*. Examples include “westward, “backward,” “downward,” Chaucer’s “To Thebesward.” Beckett used “frescoward” in “Sanies I”.

Ill Seen Ill Said’s “sweet one word”, the quantifier *less*, is also a derivational morpheme, the suffix *-less* that, added to a noun, makes an adjective, as in “issueless”, “endless,” “timeless” in *Lessness* and “bootless” (1996: 100). Another derivational morpheme Beckett uses is *-ness*; it converts adjectives or quantifiers into abstract nouns—e.g., as in “flatness”. Beckett uses it in his parody of philosophical discourse in *Watt*, treating the proper nouns as adjectives: “For it was not the Tomness of Tom, the Dickness of Dick, the Harryness of Harry, however remarkable in themselves, that preoccupied Watt, for the moment, but their Tomness, their Dickness, their Harryness then, their then-Tomness, then-Dickness, then-Harryness” (1953a: 136).

The ending *-ness* is added productively to the morpheme *-less* to derive *-lessness* in “windowlessness” (1953a: 152), “meaninglessness” (1996: 45), “endlessness,” “changelessness.” So, although it is attested in the OED as a free morpheme,¹⁶ the title *Lessness* could be a bound morpheme ripped from one of the text’s abstract nouns.

¹⁵ Cf. Casanova 1995: 25.

¹⁶ OED, 1605, gives “lessness”: “1635 GILL, *Sacr. Philos.* 59. Otherwise there should be a greatnesse in being, and a lessenesse in working. 1889 MOULE *Secr. Prayer* v. (1890), 84 Cioran, however, claims it is “forgé par Beckett”, recounting how he and Beckett tried and failed to find a French equivalent, having to settle for “la misère métaphysique d’une préposition” of the original French title (Cioran 1976: 47). But the preposition has the “lessness” of Syntacticon items.

Alone, however, it contrasts strangely with the two words to which it is affixed in that text, marking that slight semantic difference between the two matters of Beckett’s work cleaving that text, that between the changelessness of the round of sames, and the change lessward—worstward—of the matter of the dead and gone, what Cioran calls a “mélange de privation et d’infini” (1976 47). Lessness provides the counter-evidence against changelessness.

So, with her “lit aslant by the last rays,” “Let her vanish. And the rest. For good. And the sun. Last rays” (1996: 66), while the eye drops its sudden rain (67) from the tattered sky and the ancient voice its scraps for every tatter in her mortal dress.

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DANIELA CASELLI

BECKETT, DANTE AND THE ARCHIVE

Dante is ubiquitous in English-speaking modernism: Ezra Pound, in 1910, celebrates the advent of what he calls ‘the master’; W.B. Yeats regards him as the only poet able to achieve ‘unity of being’; T.S. Eliot, called by Pound ‘the true Dantescan voice’ of modernism, hails him as ‘a European’ in an essay of 1929, which, according to Samuel Beckett, sports an ‘insufferable ... professorial tone’. Beckett, who early on in his career demonstrates the presence of Dante in Joyce’s *Work in Progress*, develops instead, after his slothful character Belacqua, a purgatorial Dante whose faint, shadowy presence traverses his oeuvre.

Dante is, of course, a long-term presence in the history of English-language literature: a major occurrence in Chaucer but notably absent in the period between him and Milton, Dante is regarded as an example of medieval lack of measure throughout the eighteenth century. Rediscovered in the nineteenth century, his perceived Romantic genius is first reflected through the figure of the Byronic hero and then welded to the Risorgimento. Today, Dante remains an icon, associated in mainstream literary culture with poetic excellence, Italian musicality, and even mystery, but also treated by contemporary artists with the kind of irreverence that would be unthinkable without the experiments of the modernist period.¹ The first half of the twentieth century is a key historical moment to understand the leap between Dante as the hero of national unity and a Dante exploded and fragmented – the Dante of Andrea Zanzotto, or of Ciaran Carson’s *Inferno*, for instance. But why does the Dante inherited from Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Beata Beatrix*, Browning’s *Sordello*, and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* metamorphoses into what Seamus Heaney has called ‘the aquiline patron of international Modernism’? Heaney’s description gives us a very strong reason: Dante’s perceived, and in part fabricated, internationalism. While Shakespeare is, in the early

¹ See for instance, Ciaran Carson, *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri* (London: Granta, 2004); Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La divina mimesis* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975); and Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips’s *A TV Dante* (1989).

twentieth century, very much part of a geographical and symbolic Englishness, Dante the exile becomes the figure of linguistic and aesthetic innovation.

This is precisely the Dante we encounter, through *De vulgari eloquentia*, in Samuel Beckett's 1929 essay 'Dante...Bruno.Vico.Joyce'. Here, both Dante and Joyce 'saw how worn out and threadbare was the conventional language of cunning literary artificers, both rejected an approximation to a universal language' (Beckett 1995: 30). Joyce's language is, in the early Beckett, an artificial construction that paradoxically 'desophisticates' language through the unity of form and content. Dante's language is correspondingly described as similarly 'artificial', the result of the 'synthetic' skimming of the best parts from a number of dialects.² As Lucia Boldrini explains, the view that 'the *De vulgari eloquentia* postulated the need for an artificial, "synthetic" language – a refined and immutable version of the common language – was one of the predominant interpretations at the time of Beckett's essay.'³ The reaction against the conventionality of a worn-out language – Latin in Dante's case, English in Joyce's – is in Beckett a common characteristic of the two authors, both free from narrow national or regional prejudices.

There are a few problems with these claims, though. In order to bolster his argument, Beckett's essay reproduces excerpts from *De vulgari eloquentia* in which Dante expresses his contempt for anyone who thinks his own town the most delightful place, and who likes his own dialect better than any other: *Nam quicumque tam obscenae rationis est, ut locum suae nationis delitiosissimum credat esse sub sole, huic etiam proe cunctis propriam volgare licetur, idest maternam locutionem. Nos autem, cui mundus est patria... etc.*' When he comes to examine the dialects he finds Tuscan: '*turpissimum... fere omni Tusci in suo turpiloquio obtusi... non restat in dubio quin aliud sit volgare quod quaerimus quam quod attingit populus Tuscanorum.*' (30; sic)

The passage illustrates Dante's indignation with anyone who gives primacy to his own narrow reality. Yet, in *De vulgari* the passage in which Dante describes himself as someone 'for whom the world is fatherland as the sea is for fish' is followed by the declaration of his affection for Florence.⁴ Importantly, the adjective 'turpissimus' is

² '[...] a theory which had been denounced as "false" by Vico'. Lucia Boldrini 2001: 20.

³ Lucia Boldrini, 2001: 19.

⁴ The whole passage reads: '*Nam quicumque tam obscene rationis est ut locum sue nationis delitiosissimum credat esse sub sole, hic etiam pro cunctis proprium volgare licetur, idest maternam locutionem, et per consequens credit ipsum fuisse illud quod fuit Ade. Nos autem, cui mundus est patria velut piscibus equor, quanquam Sarnum biberimus antes dentes et Florentiam adeo diligamus ut, quia dileximus, exilium patiamur iniuste, rationi magis quam sensui spatulas nostri iudicii podiamus*' (For whoever reasons so disgustingly that he considers his birthplace to be the most lovely place under the sun, he also values his own language, that is, his mother tongue, above all others, and consequently he thinks that it was the very one which was Adam's. I, however, for whom the world is fatherland as the sea is for fish, although I drank from the Arno before I had teeth and so love Florence that for my love I suffer unjust exile, I prop up the shoulders of my judgement more by reason than by the senses) (I.vi,

from chapter eleven of book one of *De vulgari* and refers to the vernacular of Rome, while the rest of the sentence comes from chapter thirteen. Although the omissions are indicated, they are misleading; once contextualised, Dante's assertion has very different implications. In chapter ten Dante describes every vernacular found in Italy, in order to exclude them all because none of them can be regarded as *vulgare illustre*. He starts from those furthest away from 'the panther whose smell is everywhere and which is nowhere visible' (I.xvi, 1); the first *vulgare* discussed in chapter eleven, the vernacular of Rome, does not even deserve that name, since it is a 'tristiloquium'.⁵ The vivid Dantean adjective 'turpissimus' is quoted (conjugated) in the Beckett text as if it referred to the Tuscan vernacular, whereas in Dante it describes the Roman dialect: *De vulgari* is remarkably less harsh towards the dialect of Tuscany.

The second problem sidestepped in the essay is that, although Dante in *De vulgari* reacts against the 'conventionality' of Latin, he also adopts it. Dante's Latin in this text is indeed very sophisticated and has numerous cultural echoes, most notably of the thriving Latin scholastic prose of those years (especially St. Bonaventura and Egidio Colonna), but also of the philosophical prose of the radical Aristotelians.⁶ Dante asserts the superiority of the vernacular over Latin using the typical scholastic antinomy between 'natural' and 'artificial'. Latin is artificial because it is a 'gramatica', a 'lingua regulata' constructed by the 'inventores gramatice facultatis'; Dante's illustrious vernacular is, on the contrary, a 'natural' language. Thus, Dante's dissatisfaction with the 'conventionality' of the language used by 'cunning literary artificers' is paradoxically demonstrated through examples from a text in Latin, which defends through a scholastic argument the naturalness of the vernacular over Latin's artificiality. What emerges from these comparisons is that the essay has to jump through a number of hoops in order to forge this experimental parallel between Joyce and Dante.

However, in the Beckett oeuvre, this almost quintessentially modernist Dante as a linguistic innovator is extremely short lived. Such muscular Dante is readily supplanted by the image of laziness itself. 'Behold' Belacqua, the slothful character from *Purgatorio IV* who appears in a variety of guises throughout the *œuvre*: he is the overfed child pedalling faster and faster after Findlater's van in the opening of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932); he is Belacqua Shua, Dubliner, avid reader of the *Comedy* in

3). *De vulgari eloquentia*, in Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo (ed.), *Opere minori*, Milan and Naples: Ricciardi, 1979, vol. V, ii. *Dante in Hell. The De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Introduction, Text, Translation, Commentary by Warman Welliver, Ravenna: Longo, 1981, 53. Subsequent references are given in the text.

⁵ Beckett's notebook on Ariosto also discusses the establishment of Italian as a common language and quotes a passage from *De Vulgari Eloquentia* in which the vernacular is referred to as the 'panther' to be hunted. TCD MS 10962, fo. 60.

⁶ See Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *Linguistica e retorica*, 70; Maria Corti, 1981: 33-76.

More Pricks Than Kicks (1934);⁷ the ‘Belacqua bliss’ is Murphy’s impossible goal in the 1938 novel of the same title; and, by 1960, Belacqua has become, as Beckett writes to Kay Boyle on 29 August of that year: ‘no more than a kind of fetish. In the work I have finished [*Comment c’est*] he appears ‘basculé sur le côté las d’attendre oublié des cœurs où vit la grâce endormi’ (cor che in grazia vive), and I hope that’s the end of him’.⁸ Finally, in 1980, *Company/Compagnie*, tries, and fails – again – to say farewell once and for all to Belacqua, and, via him, to Dante:

So sat waiting to be purged the old lutist cause of Dante’s first quarter-smile and now perhaps singing praises with some section of the blest at last. To whom here in any case farewell.⁹

Dante will still be there, through the image of the brothers immersed in the ice of Cocytus, in *Ill Seen Ill Said* and, faintly, in *Stirrings Still*, as a ‘souvenir du purgatoire effacé’.¹⁰ All the way ‘from A to Z’, Dante is like the dim shadowy presence perceived by Mercier and Camier.

Tongue-in-cheek, *Dream* claims that ‘the powers of evocation of this Italianate Irishman were simply immense’.¹¹ Today, I would like to ask why Dante’s presence in both published texts and 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.

Let me start with the most material of examples: the book itself, the *Divine Comedy*, which we encounter in *Dream*:

One calamitous night, Belacqua [...] was affected by her person [the Syra-Cusa’s] with such force that he pressed upon her, as a gift and a mark of esteem (mark of esteem!) a beautiful book, one that he loved, that he had stolen from shelves at great personal risk; with pertinent dedication drawn by the short hairs from the text. The crass man. His lovely book! Now he has only the Florentia edition in the ignoble Salani collection, horrid, beslubbed with grotesque notes, looking like a bank-book in white cardboard and a pale gold title, very distasteful. Not indeed that there is a great deal to be said in favour of Papa Isodoro, with his primos and secundos and apple-dumpling readings. But the book itself was nice, bound well, with a bad reproduction of the Santa Maria del

⁷ For a full account of the tormented publishing history of this volume of short stories, see John Pilling, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (London: Continuum, 2011).

⁸ Samuel Beckett to Kay Boyle, 29 August 1960, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin. Now in *Letters*, II.

⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Company*, London: Picador, 1982, 85. Samuel Beckett, *Compagnie*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985, 84 (‘Ainsi se tenait en attendant de pouvoir se purger le vieux luthier qui arracha à Dante son premier quart de sourire et peut-être déjà enfin dans quelque coin perdu du paradis. A qui ici dans tous le cas adieu’.)

¹⁰ UoR MS 2933-1 (*Stirrings Still*), [2 v], Ussy 5.11.83.

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1972, 143.

Fiore prestidigitator, printed well on paper that was choice, with notes that knew their place, keeping themselves to themselves.¹²

The ‘beslubbered Salani’ is a reference to an edition of the *Divine Comedy*, published by Salani in Florence in 1892 and later reprinted many times, edited by different scholars and with a number of revisions.¹³ ‘Papa Isodoro’ refers instead to the Del Lungo edition of the *Comedy*.¹⁴

A textual comparison taking into account the Dante occurrences in the so called *Whoroscope Notebook* (MS3000) and the *Dream Notebook* indicates that it is indeed the horrid Salani which is one of the main sources in this period, while only a few references to the *Comedy* correspond to the del Lungo edition. In the *Whoroscope Notebook*, for instance, we have a scheme entitled ‘Purgatorial Distribution’ on the verso of page 2, followed by indication of lines from *Purgatory*, namely, ‘Purg. XVII, 90 sgg. & XVIII 19-39 & 49-75’. This table corresponds to the Enrico Bianchi 1921 edition of the *Divina Commedia* for the publisher Salani:

¹² Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, New York: Arcade, 1993, p. 51. The typescript of *Dream* reads “the Fiorentina edition in the ignoble Salviani” (R.U.L.).

¹³ *La Divina Commedia*, edited with a commentary by Father B. Lombardi, Florence: Salani, 1892. (Reprinted in 1898, 1899, 1905, 1920). *La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri*, turned into prose with facing original text by Mario Foresi, Florence: A. Salani, 1899. (Reprinted in 1909, 1913, 1920). *La Divina Commedia*, with a commentary by Enrico Bianchi, Florence: Salani, 1921, 1922, 1925, 1927, 1928, 1931, 1946, 1953, 1958. The editions of 1925 and 1931 are at present not available for consultation. James Knowlson, in his Beckett biography *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), writes that when Beckett moved to an old people’s home in his eighties, he “took with him the little edition of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* that he had underlined and annotated in classes with her [Bianca Esposito]” (p. 53). Knowlson points out the resemblance between this and the “beslubbered Salani edition” mentioned in *Dream* (p. 151). Edward Beckett has kindly confirmed that Samuel Beckett also possessed the 1897-8 edition of the *Divine Comedy* edited by G.L. Passerini, Florence: Sansoni, in three small volumes (105 x 70 mm). In this edition, however, no corresponding passages are to be found. Moreover, Edward Beckett infers that given the small print and the absence of underlining or annotation it is highly unlikely that Samuel Beckett would have referred to them. I would like to thank John Pilling for having first passed on to me this information, and Edward Beckett for kindly confirming it.

¹⁴ Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, with a commentary by Isidoro Del Lungo, Florence: Le Monnier, 1926. John Fletcher was the first critic to establish that the reference to “Papa Isodoro” in the text was in fact to the Isidoro Del Lungo edition: “At one moment in the *Dream* [...] Belacqua parts with his cherished copy of the *Divine Comedy* (the Del Lungo edition, at that, we are carefully informed) to his *amata* Syra-Cusa” (John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett’s Art*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1971, 112).

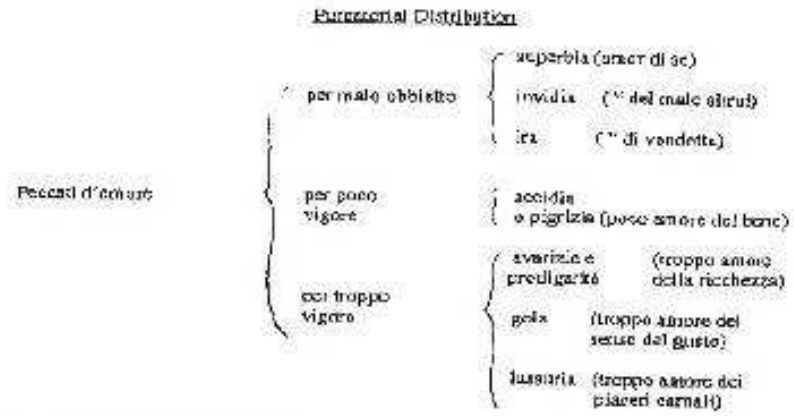
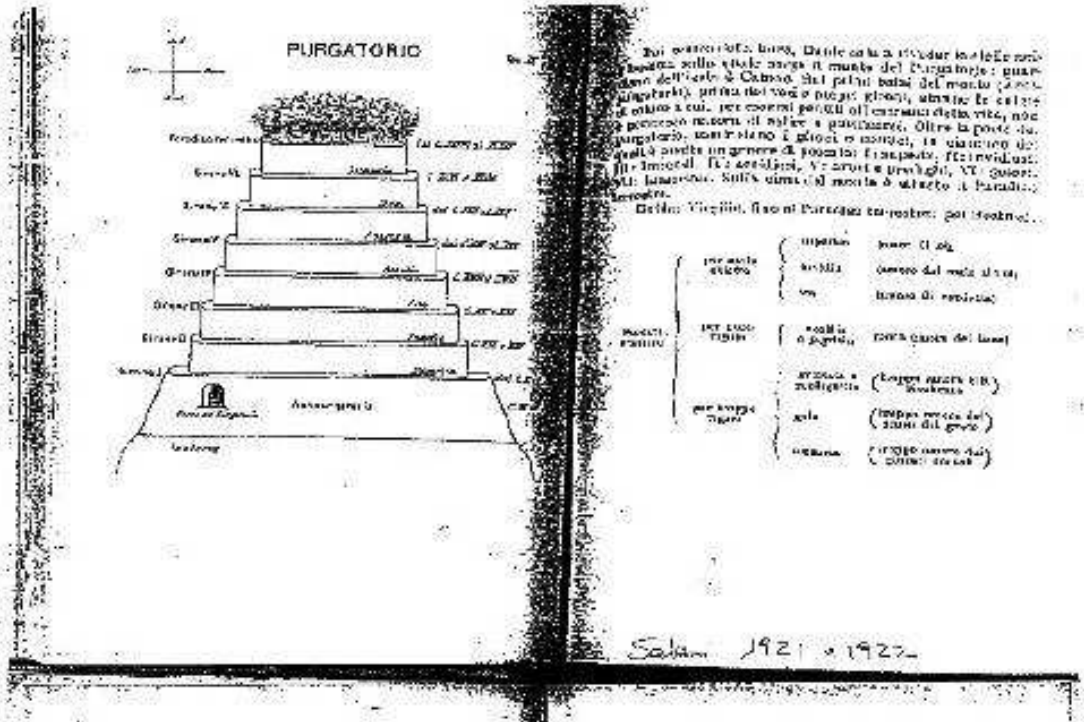


Fig. XVII 50 agg. & XVIII 19-39 & 49-75



Earlier notebooks also point to the relevance of the horrid bank-book. Of special interest to someone looking at Dante in Beckett are, of course, the so-called *Dante Notebooks*, TCD MS 10963 (pre-1926), TCD MS 10964 (dated on the cover as “Bought at Tours: Sept. 3rd 1926”) and MS 10966, held here at Trinity. Beckett titled TCD MS 10963 ‘Dante Alighiere [sic] Inferno Purgatorio and part of Paradiso’ (up to *Paradiso X*); its summaries of the Cantos continue in TCD MS 10964, which stops at Canto XXVIII, when the summaries are abruptly ended by the claim: “[Don’t understand a word of this]”. The subject is “stuck”, like Belacqua in “Dante and the Lobster”, making an exit – weeping – like B. in *Three Dialogues*.

TCD MS 10963 also has a ‘Plan of Dante’s Inferno’, which corresponds to the drawing of Hell present in the Salani edition, like in *The Whoroscope Notebook*.¹⁵ Moreover, in perfect symmetry with the Purgatorial distribution of sins present in that notebook, TCD MS 10963 has on f31 a table entitled “DISTRIBUTION OF SINS”, which is compatible with the one present in the Salani edition (the only difference lies in the use of square brackets rather than braces). The only two variants are that Beckett’s notebook has added to the list of traitors of ‘chi si fida’ [those who trust them] the four corresponding zones of torment: Caina, Antenora, Tolomea and Giudecca. The last general heading ‘Città di Dite’ is instead omitted in the notebooks, though present in the Salani edition.

While TCD MS 10963 leaves blank folio 126, on which the title suggests we should have seen a ‘Plan of Dante’s Paradiso’, the ‘Plan of Dante’s Purgatorio’, which appears on f87, corresponds again to the Salani edition, down to the shadowing of the Purgatorial gate, the ‘isoletta’ [small island], the trees on the summit (rather more abstract in Beckett than in Bianchi), and the cardinal points. In both the Trinity mss and in the *Whoroscope Notebook*, ‘the ignoble Florentia edition in the Salani collection’ -- as *Dream* defines it -- presents identical ‘plans’ of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* and illustrations of the distributions of sins. Moreover, many of the summaries of the Cantos are translations of the footnotes which ‘beslobber’ the Salani edition. For instance, the summary of Canto I of the *Inferno* reads:

Canto I

Dante, wandering aimlessly in a dark wood, comes to the foot of a steep hill and commences to climb it. But his path is barred by three wild beasts, a panther, a lion and a wolf. The poet is compelled to return to the wood, where he meets Virgil, who promises to save him from the present danger, to lead him through Inferno, and then to entrust him to the charge of Beatrice if he would ascend through Purgatory to Paradise. Dante follows him.

Allegory of Canto I

Selva Oscura Morally, vice and sin; it is ‘oscura’ because [//f3] it clogs and overcasts the mind.

Colle Virtue, which Dante is trying to attain.

Pianeta God, who is the friend of virtue.

Lonza Morally, Luxury [sic]

Politically, Florence, divided between the Bianchi & Neri

Leone Morally, Pride.

Politically, House of France

Lupa Morally, Avarice

Politically, Papal Diocese.

¹⁵ The only changes to the table are the addition of an even more detailed list of the hierarchies of the damned spirits in each “girone” and the altered position of the numbering of the “cerchi”, which in Beckett’s drawing are to the left of the picture rather than within it. The cardinal points also match, but appear at the bottom, rather than at the top of the page. For a discussion of the relevance of the Salani edition see Caselli 2001a.

Virgilio Reason, which had been dead & dumb [sic] in Dante for so long that ‘per lungo silenzio pareva fioco.’

Veltro Literally, a hound. Allegorically refers to some future leader who will save Italy from the oppression of the ruler and especially of the Papal Diocese at Rome. [//f4]

It is unlikely that Dante was referring to any definite person.

Much of the information written under the heading Allegory of Canto I can be found in the footnotes of the Salani edition. The notebook is a literal translation of many of them. A few examples follow:

2. *Selva oscura*: moralmente significa il vizio, il peccato, ed è oscura appunto perché il peccato ottenebra la mente.

13. *d'un colle*: è il colle della virtù, al quale Dante si sforza di giungere.

17. *pianeta*: [...] Moralmente, il sole che illumina il colle rappresenta Dio che protegge e assiste la virtù.

32. *lonza*: pantera, che moralmente significa la lussuria, politicamente Firenze, divisa nelle fazioni dei Bianchi e dei Neri.

45. *leone*: moralmente, la superbia; politicamente, la casa di Francia.

49. *lupa*: moralmente, l'avarizia; politicamente, la Curia papale.

63. *chi per lungo silenzio ecc.*: [...] Allegoricamente, vorrà dire che la ragione, rappresentata da Virgilio, da lungo tempo taceva in Dante peccatore.

101. *l' Veltro*: letteralmente un cane, che ucciderà la lupa; allegoricamente, un principe o un imperatore che salverà l'Italia liberandola dall'avidità dei suoi dominatori e specialmente della Curia di Roma. Che si alluda a una persona determinata non par probabile.

The point made in my example of Canto I is valid for most Cantos in TCD MSS 10963 and 10964; the footnotes in the Salani are not sufficient to account for everything present in the summaries, but they largely correspond to most entries explaining allegorical or moral meanings or illustrating various characters in the *Comedy*. If we read these summaries as *aide-mémoire*, they nevertheless construct a very specific idea of memory; in this case, the translated footnotes from the Salani edition construct a Canto I in which spatial, allegorical and moral meanings dominate.

‘Basta!’, there is considerable evidence that the horrid bank-book in white cardboard is both despised and made to work in the oeuvre. And if we zoom out for a moment, this is just an example of how Dante is a very good way to think of the relation between waste and function in Beckett: the examples from the beslubbered Salani edition demonstrate the importance in the economy of both published and archival texts of the ambiguous, somewhat even devious, relation between what is claimed to have been discarded, lost, or given away in a moment of folly and what is being made to work.¹⁶ As discussed by Dirk Van Hulle, in Beckett we do not have Adorno’s ‘Absolutes Wegwerfen’. And yet, if it the absolute throwaway is missing in Beckett this is not a

¹⁶ Cf MSA panel, organised by Dr Iain Bailey on the Modernist Throwaway. Sussex, August 2013.

pragmatic approach: it is not that anything can be made to work in Beckett in the name of a frugal Protestant economy which refuses to discard helpful material.¹⁷ Rather, it partakes in the constitution of an aesthetics not of the ‘big Dante’, as Signorina Ottolenghi calls it in ‘Dante and the Lobster’, but of ‘little Dantes’. Or, rather, Dante is big in Beckett because it contributes to the see-saw movement between effacement and presence, between wasteful and valuable material.

The fact that the horrid Salani ends up being a relevant source for early Beckett creates a structural parallel with the textual last farewell to Belacqua in *Company*. In Beckett, it is not so much that anything can be put to use but, more in line with *Endgame*, that nothing can avoid having meaning. What ends up in the archive is the beslobbered Salani, and, as Peter Fiefield has argued ‘the archive is prefigured in one of Beckett’s most iconic-and thus valued-props: an ashcan.’¹⁸

My comparison, then, points to Beckett as an archivist’s author, but not because the scraps and the notebooks simply document his intellectual development, but because what is claimed to have been lost (del Lungo) and what claimed to be worthless (Salani) construct a model of the oeuvre as archive. This archive of memories proceeds by repeating odds and ends, conjuring up dim presences, producing faintly heard noises, as if hoarse, or perhaps faint, from long silence.

But if there is something eager about the Dante summaries of the Trinity notebooks and the extracted lines in the *Whoroscope Notebook*, there is also something ‘sullen’ about the employment of these self-declared ‘horrid’ sources: ‘sullen’ is ‘the word used in the famous Carlyle-Wicksteed [prose] translation of Dante’s ‘tristi fummo’ (Pilling and Lawlor, *Poems*, 264).¹⁹ Belacqua’s accidia is, in other words, a structuring principle in the relation between Beckett and Dante.

Slothful Belacqua, who is never described in the *Comedy* as a lute maker, is instead a lute maker in two early commentaries to the *Divine Comedy*, in Benvenuto de Rambaldis de Imola (1375) and the Anonimo Fiorentino (ca 1400), as the reference to

¹⁷ Dirk Van Hulle, *Modern Manuscripts: the Extended Mind and Creative Undoing from Darwin to Beckett and Beyond*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 135.

¹⁸ Peter Fiefield, ‘Introduction’ *Modernism/Modernity*, 18:4 (2011), 676.

¹⁹ Another passage relevant to the published works is that from *Inferno* VII, 123 “tristi fummo / nell’aere dolce che dal sol s’allegra, / portando dentro accidioso fummo” [We were sullen in the sweet air that is gladdened by the sun, bearing within us the sluggish fumes], present in TCD MS 10963a and in RUL MS 3000 on its own, and in TCD MS 10963 as part of a rather long summary of the Canto, which includes, rather unusually, a comment after the title: “Canto VII (more difficult)”. The introductory paragraph to this Canto is a translation of the Salani edition, with some slight spelling difficulties. “Tristi fummo” appears in *Foirade IV* as: “Je rentre à la nuit, ils s’envolent, ils lâchent mon petit chêne et s’en vont, gavés, dans les ombres. Tristi fummo ne l’aere dolce. Je rentre, lève le bras, saisis la branche, me met debout et rentre dans la maison” (Beckett 1976, 45). The sentence is omitted in the English. The importance of Canto VII in *How It Is*, which I have demonstrated elsewhere (Caselli 2001b), is further amplified by the repeated entries in the notebooks.

‘aliquando etiam pulsabat’ in *Dream* signals. Hard to access directly at the time, the passages are reproduced under the entry ‘Belacqua’ in Paget Toynbee’s *Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante*, the standard reference book for an English-speaking student of Dante in Beckett’s time (1898 edition only).²⁰ This is just one example of the centrality of textbooks to the Beckett aesthetics, which can be seen also in the case of the philosophical and psychology notes. Even a word such as ‘precipitates’, as John Pilling and Sean Lawlor have recently shown, comes from *A History of German Literature* (JG Robertson’s revised 3rd ed, p. 352).²¹ This is in perfect accordance with the motivations for reading that we find in the correspondence in this period, such as:

I am reading Schopenhauer. Everyone laughs at that. Beaufret & Alfy etc. But I am not reading philosophy, nor caring whether he is right or wrong or a good or worthless metaphysician. An intellectual justification of unhappiness – the greatest that has ever been attempted – is worth the examination of one who is interested in Leopardi & Proust rather than Carducci & Barrès.²²

We witness to novels and letters that claim to be taking a sentence or an idea from a source, and disregarding the rest, shortchanging, perhaps even sabotaging, every kind of authority.

Another good example to think of *accidia* as a structuring principle in the oeuvre would be to look at what is possibly the most common of all places in the Comedy as received in the late nineteenth century, the episode of Francesca da Rimini in *Inferno* V. Francesca appears in *The Whoroscope Notebook* as:

Francesca da Rimini the first spirit in Inferno to speak to Dante.

Francesca fù [sic] la zia di quel
Guido Novello da Polenta, presso
cui Dante passò a Ravenna gli
ultimi anni della sua vita.

²⁰ Toynbee, *Dictionary of Proper Names*, 74; (the 1968 reprint of Toynbee’s volume revised by Charles S. Singleton is appreciably different). I would like to thank Zygmunt Baranski for pointing out to me that the excerpts from Benvenuto and the Anonimo were reproduced in Toynbee. See also Daniela Caselli, “Looking It Up in My Big Dante”: A Note on “Sedendo and Quiescendo”, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 6:2 (Spring 1997), 85-93, and “L’andar su che porta?": Dante nel primo Beckett’, *The Italianist*, 18 (1998), 130-54. The relevance of Toynbee and of the commentaries is later reiterated by Jean-Pierre Ferrini, who however does not acknowledge my previous work on this topic. Jean-Pierre Ferrini, *Dante et Beckett* (Paris: Hermann, 2003), 24-25.

²¹ Beckett, Samuel, Sean Lawlor, and John Pilling (eds). 2014. *The collected poems of Samuel Beckett: a Critical Edition*, 259 (JG Robertson’s *A History of German Literature*, 352).

²² Samuel Beckett to Thomas McGreevy, Friday, ca. 18 to 25 July 1930. *The Letters 1929–1940*, 33.

[Francesca was the aunt of that Guido Novello da Polenta with whom Dante spent the last years of his life]

Dante may have known Paolo in Florence

This corresponds verbatim to the notes to the Scartazzini-Vandelli 1922 edition (Caselli 2001a). another important edition of the *Comedy* (which, however, has no place in the fictional universe of Beckett.)

MS 10966 also elaborates on Canto V (the last Canto present in this notebook) and its ‘carnal sinners’ – among whom Semiramis, who is one of the epithets for the Syracusa in *Dream*. Francesca is described as follows:

first spirit in Hell to speak to Dante. Daughter of Guido Minore da Polenta, died 1310. About 1275 married Gianciotto Malatesta, Lord of Rimini, by whom she had a daughter, Concordia. According to some, Francesca thought she was marrying Paolo, and only realised morning after marriage [sic] that her husband was Gianciotto, deformed and hunchbacked. Improbable, as Paolo was married since 1269 to Orabile Beatrice di Ghiaggiuolo, by whom he had 2 [one word erased, probably “sons”] children, Umberto & Margherita. Francesca was the aunt of Guido Novello da Polenta, under whose protection, at Ravenna, Dante spent his last years. Cf. Ricci: L’Ultimo Rifugio di Dante.

The MS continues to describe Paolo and Gianciotto debating the quality of Dante’s cruelty, and reproducing large portions of the Canto. It would be tempting to read the long quotations from Canto V, the detailed summary, and the echoes between the *Whoroscope Notebook* and TCD MS 10966 as part of a special interest on the part of Beckett (or of his private tutor in Italian, Bianca Esposito) for one of the better-known Cantos of the *Comedy* (Knowlson 1996, 51-4). Certainly, *Inferno V* is a Canto which remains relevant to the published works; it appears in ‘Hell Crane to Starling’, which refers to lines 40-48 in which ‘the souls of the lustful are compared to wheeling flocks of sterlings and to cranes chanting their lay’ (Federman and Fletcher 1970, 10). It also occurs in the short story ‘A Wet Night’, in which *Inferno V*, 122 is misquoted by ‘the Gael’, who replies to the aptly named ‘violinist d’amore’: “Like hell they do’ groaned the Gael, *ricordandosi del tempo felice*’ (Beckett 1993, 69; the author’s emphasis). Moreover, the line ‘quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante’, [that day we read no further], from the ‘Paolo-Francesca episode’ is described in the essay ‘Papini’s Dante’ (an essay which defines itself as ‘marginalia’) as ‘the imperishable reference [...] to the incompatibility of the two operations [i.e. reading and loving]’.²³ The same line becomes in *How It Is /*

²³ “The purpose of these marginalia would be the reduction of Dante to lovable proportions. But who wants to love Dante? We want to READ Dante, for example, his imperishable reference (Paolo-Francesca episode) to the incompatibility of the two operations.” (Beckett 1984, 81)

Comment c'est 'that day we prayed no further' / 'ce jour-là nous ne priâmes pas plus avant' (Beckett 1964, 36; 1961, 57).

But how important is this canto to the oeuvre? Two classic ways of answering this question would be what I would like to call here 'the Beckett scholar's interpretation', and 'the Dante scholar's interpretation'. The first scholar might emphasise the importance of the Paolo and Francesca episode in a series of texts by Beckett, using the detailed summary in the Trinity notebooks as evidence to support her interpretation, and arguing that the chronological distance separating the different texts from the notebooks is proof of Beckett's long-lasting interest in the Canto. The Dante specialist, on the other hand, might underline the cliché quality of the episode, and use the history of the reception of Dante in English-speaking literature to prove that throughout the nineteenth century Canto V was one of the most often translated and reprinted. Any short quotation from such episode would not prove Beckett a Dante scholar but, on the contrary, it would only demonstrate an unimpressive, if not necessarily uninteresting, schoolboy knowledge of the 'divine Florentine', followed by sustained recycling, or, perhaps less uncharitably put, echoing.

The first observation to be made is that all these texts, notebooks included, display a fragmentary use of Canto V (even when they summarise it). The fragmentariness of these allusions and quotations, however, can be defined as such only if we assume that it comes from a whole (in this case the *Comedy* or Dante) to which a higher value is assigned. To see the fleeting fragmentariness of such allusions and quotations as unimpressive (the Dante scholar's position) implies an a priori decision on what would be a 'correct', or 'successful', or 'significant' use of Dante. This critical position is challenged by the Beckett *œuvre*, which questions ideas of value by, as we know, 'failing better'. On the other hand, to see the recurrence of Canto V as proof of Dante's influence on Beckett, or of Beckett's deep knowledge of Dante (the Beckett scholar's position) amounts to disregarding the ambivalence produced by Beckett's poetics of *residua* and to privileging the idea that Beckett's originality derives from his knowledge of great literature in general, and of Dante in particular. In short: the two positions follow the same logic, even when they support a different author.

Canto V is a good example of a presence that cannot be taken as proof of either a 'good' or 'bad' use of Dante, but as illustrating a remarkably consistent aspect of the Beckett *œuvre* insofar as it contributes to its composition as 'odds and ends', 'disjecta', 'residua', 'fizzles', 'foirades', and 'abandoned work[s]'.¹

Dante is, in short, a great place to think about different forms of value implicit in the relationship between preservation, functionality, and getting rid of. A converse example is the line from *Inferno III*, 63 'chi per lungo silenzio pareo fioco' – a line well-known to scholars. The crux in Dante studies is 'fioco': does it refer to the acoustic dimension (is Virgil hoarse?) or the appearance (faint, dimly visible?). In the critical tradition of the *Comedy*, the line is usually interpreted as a translation of 'a phonic emotion into a visual

one' to indicate a blurred image, surfacing from the surrounding darkness as if from a long absence.²⁴

The undecidability is reflected and refracted throughout the oeuvre, from TCD 10963, f 3 (Virgilio Reason, which had been dead & dumb [sic] in Dante for so long that 'per lungo silenzio pareva fioco. '), to the *Whoroscope Notebook* (these entries could be quite late,²⁵ but the similar phrasing admits the hypothesis of the Scartazzini-Vandelli 1922)²⁶, *Watt's* appearance as 'lit less and less by the receding lights, until it was scarcely to be distinguished from the dim wall behind' (16); *The Calmative's*²⁷ marshalling of the words and hearing only 'a kind of rattle, unintelligible even to me who knew what was intended. But it was nothing, mere speechlessness due to long silence, as in the wood that darkens the mouth of hell, do you remember, I only just.' (33);²⁸ *How It Is*:

²⁴ Vittorio Sermoni, *L'Inferno di Dante*, Milan: Rizzoli, 1988, 9; Giovanni Getto, 'Inferno I', in *Lectura Dantis Scaligera. Inferno*, Florence: Le Monnier, 1967, 12. Most critics follow Getto's interpretation. See for example Pompeo Giannantonio, 'Inferno I', in Pompeo Giannantonio (ed.), *Lectura Dantis Neapolitana*, Naples: Loffredo, 1986. The passage has also been allegorically interpreted as the dim surfacing of reason after its long silence from the sinner's conscience. See Emilio Pasquini and Antonio Quaglio (eds.), *Commedia*, Milan: Garzanti, 1987.

²⁵ For hypothesis regarding the dating of the notebook, see Fredrik N. Smith, "Dating the *Whoroscope Notebook*", *Journal of Beckett Studies* n.s. 3:1 (1993), and Geert Lernout, *James Joyce and Fritz Mauthner and Samuel Beckett, In Principle, Beckett is Joyce*, ed. Friedhelm Rathjen, Edinburgh: Split Pea Press, 1994, 26; both quoted in John Pilling, *Beckett Before Godot*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 252, note 45.

²⁶ The Scartazzini-Vandelli edition of 1922 matches all the other entries of the notebook too; so does the Steiner 1921, which, however, presents no relevant notes. All the other Scartazzini and Scartazzini-Vandelli editions, from 1875 onward, do not have all these relevant notes. There are a few minor discrepancies between the Scartazzini-Vandelli 1922 and the first entries at the end of the *Whoroscope Notebook*. In the passage from *Inferno* IV, 103-105, the comma after "n'andammo" is missing in the notebook, while the contraction "dov'era" reads in the notebook "dove era". The line "Cesar armato con gli occhi grifagni" (erroneously marked as *Inferno* 20.103), misses the "e" at the end of Cesare, which, nevertheless, is present in the second quotation of the same line, also italicised in the notebook but not in Scartazzini-Vandelli or in any other edition.

²⁷ See also Jean-Pierre Ferrini, 'À partir du desert. Dante et l'aphonie de Virgile dans "Le calmant" de Samuel Beckett', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 13 (2003), 201-12; Ferrini's reading is indebted to Kelly Anspaugh's view of *The Calmative* as a subversion of the *Comedy* in his "The partially purged: Samuel Beckett's "The Calmative" as Anti-Comedy", *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 22:1 (1996), 30-41.

²⁸ Je préparai donc ma phrase et ouvris la bouche, croyant que j'allais l'entendre, mais je n'entendis qu'une sorte de râle, inintelligible même pour moi qui connaissais mes intentions. Mais ce n'était rien, rien que l'aphonie due au long silence, comme dans le bosquet où s'ouvrent les enfers, vous rappelez-vous, moi tout juste (53).

question if what he has said or rather I heard of that voice ruined from such long silence a third two fifths or every word question if there when it stops if somewhere there food for thought prayer without words against a stable-door long icy toil towards the too late all-forgiving what else night at dead water on the deep on the little sea poor in isles or else some other voyage (91)²⁹

This paragraph is also sprinkled with words that have Dantean relevance in the Beckett canon, such as ‘icy’ and ‘toil’, a word used for the purgatorial ascent from *Dream* to *The Calmative*. In the French, the verb used in the sentence ‘quand elle s’arrête’, lead us, via *Premier amour*, ‘là où le verbe s’arrête, on dirait du Dante’ (44). Furthermore, the ‘dead water’, ‘morte-eau’, is the Dantean ‘morta gora’, which describes the Stygian bog, a central setting for this Beckett text.

The faintness persists in *Stirrings Still* mss (RUL), also indicating a link between this line and the correspondence, such as the letter to Nancy Cunard in 1956: ‘Have just succeeded in grinding out of my gritty old maw “per lungo silenzio..fioco” the one-act howl for Marseille and am not a pretty sight as a result.’³⁰

Letters too create a disjunction between correct interpretation and attachment to an archive of memory. In a letter to Duthuit in 1949 (no exact date) Beckett gives details of the traitors in the 9th circle of hell (among whom the two brothers I have mentioned as appearing in *Ill Seen Ill Said*) and writes:³¹

In the way of descriptive frozen verses I have not found anything that would do. It would not be so bad if from time to time the Innuits ate their young, like Ugolino...

Poscia, più che il dolore, potè il digiuno.

A very dubious interpretation, incidentally, but one to which I am attached.³²

To summarise, *Inferno V*, a Dantean common place of which we hear a lot in the very early manuscripts, is only very marginally there in the oeuvre. And yet, the faint echo from *Inferno I*, instead, resonates throughout. An economic reading of Beckett, which can decide *a priori* which bits are valuable and which to be disregarded, is thus doomed to fail. The economy is of a different kind: as *Mercier and Camier* put it, there is always a price to pay for quotations, even when we agree to have ‘no quotations at any

²⁹ question ce qu’il vient de dire plutôt moi d’entendre de cette voix ruinée de s’être si longtemps tue le tiers les deux cinquièmes ou alors tout chaque mot question si là quand elle s’arrête si là-dedans quelque part matière à réflexion prière sans paroles contre la porte d’une étable longue montée glacée vers la toute pardonnante trop tard quoi encore la nuit au large à la morte-eau sur la petite mer pauvre en îles ou alors quelque autre voyage (143).

³⁰ Beckett to Nancy Cunard, 6 June 1956, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1941–1956*, edited by Gorge Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overback (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 626.

³¹ Duthuit had written an article and also *Une fête en Cimmérie* in 1949 containing Matisse’s paintings of Innuits.

³² SBLII, 112.

price'. Or, to follow a more scatological line, we can go back to a letter which Beckett sent to Jérôme Lindon of 20 January 1954, in which the author expresses his dismay that the publisher has taken *Mercier et Camier* seriously [and] 'jests that it could only come out with a number of abandoned works [...] in a volume to be called "Merdes Posthumes."³³ Beckett is, at this point in time, fully into his role of *auctor* with 'his bay about his brow', as *Dream* puts it via Dante, and yet plays with the idea of the oeuvre as 'dumping ground' (Fifield; n.b. he makes distinctions between *Texts for Nothing* and *Foirades*, see p. 446 of *Letters*, II). In the 1970s, Italian artist Giacomo Manzoni unambiguously protested against (while also of course cashing in) the fraught relationship between authority and value by producing and displaying jarred turds that he entitled 'merda d'autore' ("author's shit"). Mark Nixon has recently reminded us of Beckett's scathing remark about Joyce signing toilet paper, while David Whatley has made an interesting study of these 'Carboniferous pudenda' of the self and the role of foul papers vs fair copies in *Molloy* and the *Watt* manuscripts (150).³⁴

In Brecht's poem 'Lesebuch für Städtebewohner',³⁵ the I is incited to 'efface the trace'. But rather than the paranoid regime of the Brecht poem, we have in Beckett the promise of keeping Dante 'out of sight'; we are told of foolish bequeathing of copies of the *Comedy*, left behind in a bar; we witness lavish investments in Dantean *loci communes* giving as a meagre return a mere variation on a cliché. This is how, in Beckett, Dante shifts the focus from the problem of knowledge to that of authority: not so much 'how much' Dante but 'how' can we see Dante. Dante is not a source in its explicative sense, but is part of the Beckett archive. Not just because we have, in reality and in fiction, a number of *Divine Comedies* on the shelves of Beckett's Library,³⁶ but

³³ John Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology*, 122.

³⁴ "Your Papers!": Archiving Beckett and Beckett's Archive of the Self *Literary Imagination* 15:2, 2013, 149-162.

³⁵ Trenne dich von deinen Kameraden auf dem Bahnhof / Gehe am Morgen in die Stadt mit zugeknöpfter Jacke/ Suche dir Quartier un wenn dein kamerad anklopft:/ Öffne, öffne die Tür nicht/ Sondern/ Verwisch die Spuren!// Wenn du deinen Eltern begegnest in der Stadt Hamburg oder sonstwo/ Gehe an ihnen fremd vorbei, biege um die Ecke, erkenne sie nicht/ Zieh den Hut ins gesicht, den sie dir schenkten/ Zeige, o zeige dein gesicht nicht/ Soncern / Verwisch die Spuren!// Iß das Fleisch, das da ist! Spare nicht!/ Gehe in jades haus, wenn es regent, und setze dich auf jedem Stuhl, der da ist/ Aber bleibe nicht sitzen! Und vergiß deinen Hut nicht!/ Ich sage dir: / Verwisch die Spuren!// Was immer du sagst, sag er nicht zweimal/ Findest du deinem Gedanken beim einem andern: veleugne ihn./ Wer seine Unterschrift nicht gegeben hat, wer kein Bild hinterließ/ Wer nicht dabei war, wer nichts gesagt hat/ Wie soll der zu fassen sein!/ Verwisch die Spuren!// Sorge, wenn du zu sterben gedenkst/ Daß kein Grabmal steht and verrät, wo du liegst/ Mit einer deutlichen Schrift, die dich anzeigt/ Und dem Jahr deines Todes, das sich überführt!/ Noch einmal: / Verwisch die Spuren!// (Das wurde mir gesagt)/ Aus dem 'Lesebuch für Städtebewohner' / (Bertolt Brecht 1960:172.)

³⁶ Various editions of the *Comedy* are held by the Beckett Foundation at the University of Reading (the Cary, the Dragone, the Concordances to Dante's Latin Work) or quoted in the published (the Del Lungo, the Salani) or unpublished works (Agnelli on Dante's topo-cronography, Ricci's *L'ultimo*

also because Dante is part of those layers, defined in *Malone Dies* as infinite, which constitute the very language of the Beckett *œuvre*.

The Beckett's archives do not help us to explain Beckett away; rather, the Beckett *œuvre* claims to be an archive.

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viaggio di Dante, Della Torre on the role of 'pity and piety both' in the *Inferno*). MS 10966 reads:
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|-------------|---|------------|
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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.

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KEIR ELAM

“THESE OLD P.M.S ARE GRUESOME”:

Post-mortem Poetics in Beckett’s Late Plays

Samuel Beckett is often associated with lateness. He has frequently been classified as a late modernist. Books abound on his late style, on his late modernist style, his late fiction, his late plays. And indeed, it is especially the late Beckett that is equated with late modernism, or sometimes with postmodernism or with posthumanism. The late Beckett: the phrase lends itself to a potentially infelicitous pun that the interested party might not have disdained. One is reminded of Tom Stoppard’s philosopher George Moore in *Jumpers*, and his problems with the late Bertrand Russell:

I do not propose this late evening to follow my friend Russell, this evening to follow my late friend Russell, to follow my good friend the late Lord Russell, necrophiliac rubbish! ... my very old friend - now dead, of course - ach! (Stoppard 2013: 8).

Like Stoppard’s Moore, I do not intend here to discuss Beckett’s ontological lateness, although in his case the *calembour* on death is actually more appropriate than embarrassing, not because, like Lord Russell, Beckett is “now dead, of course”, but because so much of his so-called late work has itself to do with death or with dying, with being or about to be late. Beckett in this sense was not at all scandalized by the necrophiliac, or at least the necrologic.

In addition to lateness, Beckett has also been associated with lastness. Anthony Cronin and others have defined him as the last modernist, and lastness, like lateness, is itself a recurrent theme in Beckett, from “the last at last seen of him” in *Murphy* to *Krapp’s Last Tape* to Beckett’s anecdote in his last interview with Mel Gussow (1989, p. 61): “They’re all dead. ... I’m the last”. This paper addresses lateness and lastness in Beckett’s drama and in particular his last play, *What Where* (1983). *What Where* is a play that has much to do with both lateness and lastness. It is likewise a play that raises more specifically the question of its own late or last or post modernism, and possibly of its post humanism.

The questions raised by *What Where* begin with its intriguing title, a paradoxically affirmative interrogative, lacking a question mark. Thereafter, the play is probably best

remembered for its first words and for its last words. The play begins with a kind of ending, with lastness. The enigmatic opening line “We are the last five” immediately raises the question “who”, despite the fact that the pronoun “who” is missing from the title: who is speaking, who are we, the last five of whom or what? It poses, in other words, the question of the play’s subject, both in its grammatical and in its thematic sense. The line may evoke survival after some apocalyptic scenario, along the lines of Mary’s Shelley’s *The Last Man*, or possibly of Beckett’s own *Endgame*. Or it may more mundanely signify that the five are the last of an unidentified series. The second line, instead, with its somewhat antique rhetorical inversion – “In the present as were we still” – seems to imply non-survival: it can presumably be paraphrased “as if we were still in the present”, or alternatively “in the present, as if we were still [alive]” (with the verb in the subjunctive). We are the last five but we are no longer in the present, or we are in the present but no longer “we”.

The play’s oft-quoted last words also allude to lastness and to ending:

V: Time passes.

That is all.

Make sense who may.

I switch off.

[*Light off P.*

Pause.

Light off V.] (Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 476; all references to Beckett’s plays are to this edition)

The play’s final line, “I switch off”, is accompanied in performance by the dimming of the spotlight on P., the player alone on stage. Switching off, both verbally and visually, is the technological equivalent to the traditional curtain fall, and as such it recalls the endings of earlier Beckett plays, such as the finale to *Krapp’s Last Tape* in which Krapp, recording what is possibly his last tape, suddenly “switches off, wrenches off tape, throws it away”; or *Play* which ends with the “spot off M. [Man] Blackout”, or *Catastrophe*, the play written immediately before *What Where*, which concludes with “*Fade of light on face*”. There may be other implications to the switching off, as we will see.

The text’s notorious penultimate line “Make sense who may” – which has given the title to a book (Davis and Butler, 1989) and several articles on Beckett – again raises the question of the subject. It explicitly introduces the relative pronoun “who” for the first time, instead of the titular “what” and “where”, but in this case it appears to refer not only to the subject of the play but also and especially to the subject of its reception, of he or she who is able or authorized to make sense of it (“who may” with its implication of authorization, not “who can”). As such, it is a challenge launched to audiences (who probably do not need it, having done nothing so far but struggle to make sense) and, perhaps, to actors, directors and even to critics and scholars. The latter, critics and scholars, have not been slow to take up Beckett’s hermeneutic gauntlet, the invitation to

make sense of the play, which they evidently feel authorized to interpret. The text thus poses the metatextual issue of its own meaning, while at the same time it defies interpretation, since "who may" sounds suspiciously like "who dare" (make sense who dare). Beckett himself subsequently underlined his resistance to the interpretation of his pièce. In an earlier 1983 interview with Mel Gussow, Beckett famously protested "I don't know what it means. Don't ask me what it means. It's an object." (Gussow 1996: 42). Beckett refuses to take up his own hermeneutic challenge, or perhaps does not consider himself authorized to do so, despite his authoriality. This is a favourite Beckettian ploy from *Godot* on: namely, to invite and at the same time refute all interpretative endeavor. Nevertheless he does, despite himself, provide a clue of a kind: it, the play, is an object, not a subject, or perhaps has no subject. The penultimate line may also, finally, have a wider referential catchment area as an invitation or challenge, Beckett's defiant last authorial word, that can be extended retrospectively to his dramatic and literary canon in general. Making sense of the "who" in *What Where* thus involves a broader problem of subjectivity in Beckett at large, especially the "late" Beckett.

The potential dramatic subjects of *What where* are four or perhaps five. The list of Dramatis personae of *What Where* presents four figures – characters is hardly the right word - BAM BEM BIM AND BOM together with the VOICE OF BAM (V) which is the dominant presence on stage through its megaphone. V is evidently included as a separate dramatis persona or, perhaps, dramatis impersona: "We are the last five", not four. It is V who pronounces the opening and closing words, while the silent BAM, alone on stage, is lit and unlit. BAM would appear to be the likeliest candidate as speaking and acting subject, both through his continuous bodily person and through his voice, although the two are separated. The question is complicated, however, by the multiplicity and by the virtual identity of the BM figures, described by Beckett in his opening note:

Note

Players as alike as possible.

Same long grey gown.

Same long grey hair.

V in the shape of a small megaphone at head level. (469)

The physical and phonetic identity or near-identity of the BM figures corresponds to their similar roles in the dramatic and stage action. BAM interrogates BOM BEM and BIM in turn about the torture he has inflicted on one of the other two BMs in order to get him to say first "what" and then to say "where". Not only the signifieds of what and where but also the signifiers, the two pronouns themselves ("what and 'what'; where and 'where'"). All attempts fail, and lead to the punishment of the unsuccessful torturer. The BM figures thus exchange roles as torturer and victim respectively. The

verbal and stage routine is the same each time, with variations only in the cardinal points from which each figure enters and exits (respectively North, East, West), in the season (respectively spring, summer, autumn, winter, in the canonical order), and in the word to be confessed, first what, then where.

Interpretations of the play and its subject or subjects have fallen broadly into two schools of thought, the political and the psychological. Responses to early productions of the play tended to stress the political issues that are undoubtedly potentially present in the text, associating it with *Catastrophe*, the dramaticule with which it was performed in its British premiere at the 1984 Edinburgh Festival. A good deal of subsequent critical commentary has likewise identified the "what" of the play with political torture, and has even occasionally hazarded an identification of the where, namely eastern Europe or alternatively Turkey (encouraged by Beckett's apparent intention in his 1986 Stuttgart production, to have each figure wear an Armenian Tarboosh, and his invitation to the actors to "think of the political situation in Turkey" [Gontarski, 1987, 121]). This reading interprets the multiplied or fragmented subjectivity as a splitting into active and passive agency: BAM and the voice V on the one side, BOM BEM and BIM on the other. The primary subject becomes collective, namely the state or some political organ thereof. The most categorical subscriber to this reading is Damien O'Donnell, director of the 1999 *Beckett on film* version of the play, who affirms emphatically:

The whole play is about power and the abuse of power, and how information is power, so we used the library as a metaphor for somebody who has control of all the power and all the information ... *What Where* is about a brooding, palpable evil, which is a theme that occurs in Beckett's other work (O'Donnell 2014).

O'Donnell's somewhat Orwellian reading of the action is clear in his production not only in Bam's imperative interrogating voice but also in the choice of Doctor-Who-like science fiction costumes. The setting, a sanitized library with illuminated bookcases hosting identically bound volumes, suggests an institutional context, while also emphasizing perhaps, in addition to the control of power, the play's own bookish textuality (indeed, the production begins with the wind-swept pages of an open book). There is little suggestion here of any identity between Bam and the other Bm's, who seem to represent not a fragmented subject but rather a binary division between subject and object.

The *Beckett on film* production, nevertheless, does perhaps authorize a reading of the play as a re-embodiment of the late modernist or postmodernist subject. As Anna McMullan observes, "The repetition or play of 'simulacres' not only destabilizes ontological certainties or hierarchies, but is also a means of foregrounding space itself, the unfigurable absence of centre or 'self' which challenges and redefines the limits of representation", (McMullan, 1993, 44). BAM and company with their metallic voices and their repetitive automata-like discourse and movement take on a certain robotic or

cybernetic quality, as if they inhabited the realm of “embodied virtuality”, as N. Katherine Hayles calls it in *How We Became Posthuman* (1-24). This reading corresponds to what has been called the posthuman turn in recent Beckett criticism. Jonathan Boulter, for example, affirms that “Beckett's characters may be posthuman but they are not fully postcorporeal” (Boulter 2013, 15), a description that might well fit O'Donnell's version, in which the figures of the last four or five appear to have a marginal humanity but a still more or less intact corporeality.

A very different reading of the play appears in Beckett's own tv adaptation *Was wo*, which he co-directed for the Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1986. We might call the recording of *Was Wo* Beckett's last tape. In his production there is no setting, just the all-encompassing darkness familiar from other dramaticules, while the physical form of the dramatic figures is radically changed with regard to Beckett's original opening stage direction, being reduced to bodiless post-corporeal faces. As Stanley Gontarski observes: “Instead of players in long gray gowns, their own corporeality suspect, the four figures of the revised, television *What Where* now appeared as floating faces dissolving in and out [of the light] ... What characters, what bodies, finally exist in *What Where* are created by voice, less absent presences than present absences.” (Gontarski 2001, 176). In this version the line of demarcation between BAM and the others, and between subject and object, becomes far less well defined. BAM and company floating on and off the screen are not embodied virtuality but disembodied ethereality, while the voice of V is not metallicly cybernetic but atonally otherworldly.

Nevertheless, the attempt to make sense of Beckett's revised version, by those who may or who dare, has generally involved the attempt to find at all costs a recognizably human “who” as well as a well-defined thematic “what”. A good example is Enoch Brater's account in *Beyond Minimalism*:

On television *Was Wo* turns inward, personalizing and depoliticizing the stage play even further. Torture becomes more explicitly self-inflicted, a function of memory, remorse, and the relentless need to tell a story. ... We concentrate not on a repeated body movement but on a held facial expression. Heads imply a mind and the hell that lies within (Brater 1987, 162)

This seems a perfectly reasonable affirmation, and indeed it is quite legitimate to read *What Where* as a kind of psychodrama. The danger, however, in this approach lies precisely in its attempt to restore or reconstitute in Beckett's play a kind of modernist subjectivity, fragmented but in the end unitary, a single mind inflicting torture on its own dissociated parts. There seems to be something a little perverse in the attempt to redo via critical interpretation what Beckett has so strategically undone in his texts, as if to deny the disquieting force of Beckett's scattered or shattered personae, and thereby save the reassuring humanistic organicism of the represented character. BAM becomes a singular psyche divided between warring versions of himself. A similar restorative reading has characterized the critical approach to other dramaticules, notably *Not I*, which has often been reconstructed by critics as the troubled autobiography account by

Mouth, subject of her own narration (see Elam 1986). Again there is something incongruous if not paradoxical in the insistence on the "I" in *Not I*, as if to impede what Beckett calls Mouth's "vehement refusal to relinquish third person" (375). Not I - Yes, you! Mouth's resistance towards the I -- and thus to confessing her identity -- is recalled in *What Where's* avoidance of "who" and the BM's refusal, even under torture, to say "what" or "where". There is a flight from subjectivity in these plays. And there is, especially, a flight from unified subjectivity. The multiplication of identity in the four BM's, like the multiplication the voices speaking to listener in *That Time*, suggests a fragmenting of the subject that is not necessarily re-composable into a singular "who" or "what" or even "where".

In this context it might be well to recall Derrida's caveat regarding interpretative readings of Beckett in general:

The composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of his works, even the ones that seem the most "decomposed", that's what "remains" finally the most "interesting", that's the work, that's the signature, this remainder which remains when the thematics is exhausted (and also exhausted, by others, for a long time now, in other modes) (Jacques Derrida 2002, 61).

Derrida, therefore, warns us against the thematic reconstruction of Beckett's deconstructions or decompositions, and advises us to content ourselves with the trace, the signature that remains after interpretation has failed.

Regarding the interpretation of *Was Wo* it is not necessarily true that Beckett's television production of his own play is offered as a psychodrama figuring a mind and the hell that lies within. The audience's experience of the production is not that of recomposing the pieces of a the puzzle into a guiding self, but, more probably and more simply that of wondering what and where the speaking heads are doing and saying. On the what, as we have seen, Beckett is reticent, but on the where he remarked during work on the production that the Voice of Bam could be thought as coming from "beyond the grave" (Knowlson 1996, 686). This posthumous state might also be applied to the decidedly ghostly floating and speaking heads on the screen, whose material physicality seems at best precarious.

The semantic paradigm of the posthumous finds confirmation in the play's last line. "I switch off", as well as indicating closure, is a ready trope for an ending of another kind, namely death. As such V's "I switch off" is the last in the series of what we might call Beckett's famous last words, final lines which seem to suggest the death – in progress or imminent or having already taken place – of the protagonist. *That Time* ends with "gone in no time" (395): "go" and "going" and "gone" are in Beckett recurrent synonyms for die, dying and dead. *A Piece of Monologue* concludes with "Alone gone" (429), *Rockaby* with the death-wish, the Schopenhauerian *noluntas* that is everywhere manifest in Beckett's late plays:

fuck life

stop her eyes
 rock her off
 rock her off (442; on Beckett and *noluntas* see Orlandini, 2015)

“Switch off” may be, therefore, like “go” or “gone” or “rock off”, a variation on what Beckett in *A Piece of Monologue* calls the “rip word” (429), in the sense of death word, the r-i-p word, rest in peace, *requiescant in pace*, even if Beckett’s dramatis personae are never in peace. *What Where* may thus be one of the gruesome pm’s or postmortems referred to prophetically by Krapp (“these old post-mortems are gruesome”, 218). This suggests a quite different post-human scenario from O’Donnell’s futuristic library with its cyborg creatures. Beckett’s figures 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. We are the last five. This also places them beyond the bounds of modern, or late modern, or post-modern subjectivity. They are simply post. “The danger”, as Beckett warns us in his early essay on Joyce, “is in the neatness of identification” (“Dante”, 19), and these critical categories may attempt too neat an identification, or at least a classification.

Of course, to consider Beckett’s late or last creatures as posthumous, perhaps obliged to carry out gruesome self post-mortems is no less an interpretation than to consider them as parts of a mind or as victims of political oppression (although these interpretations are not necessarily reciprocally exclusive). The ‘post-mortem’ reading opens up other possible hermeneutic vistas. The floating heads of *Was wo* may, for example, be imprisoned in a Dantean landscape, as Beckett himself seems to suggest in his last interview with Gussow:

[... it might be] about a place without issue. No exit. The four [Bam, Bom, Bim, Bem] are trapped. One by one they have an opportunity to ask the victim what where, and they receive no answer. If they did, perhaps they would leave ... (Gussow, 1996, 43)

This suggests a possible clue in locating the where of *What where*, namely in some infernal *huis clos*, not unlike the dark Dantean non-spaces of *Play* or *Not I* (see Elam 1994). The BM’s, from this perspective, may be condemned to the eternal repetition of interrogation and reciprocal torture, and to an endless switching on and switching off.

If nothing else, the posthumous or post-mortem reading does place in question Beckett’s supposed representation of the modernist or postmodernist subject, or of subjectivity *tout court*. Nevertheless, this interpretation, like others, still responds to the desire for recomposition and to the imperative to make sense rather than allowing ourselves simply to be seduced, as Derrida advises us, by “the composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of his works” (Derrida 2002, 61), their signature. John Calder suggested that *What Where* belongs to the group of texts that he termed

"Beckett's ghost period, where phantoms that echo the haunting quality of memory and nostalgia in his work are seen or described on stage" (Calder 1983, 219). To identify the figures in the play as ghosts, however, may raise as many questions as it seems to solve. Or better, it raises questions precisely in the attempt to find a definitive and, in the end, reassuring solution. What does it mean to identify Beckett's figures as ghosts? Are they to be seen as revenants, back from the dead? If so, in what sense can they be said to be "back"? And back where?

On this matter, it is difficult to avoid quoting Derrida again, and in particular the questions he poses in defining his concept of "hauntology" in *Specters of Marx*: "What is a ghost? What is the *effectivity* or the *presence* of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there *there*, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time." (Derrida 1994, 10, my emphasis). The effectivity or the presence of Beckett's creatures is precisely the problem (what where?). Hovering between first time, repetition and last time, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, they seem to defy identification. Perhaps we should leave them there, suspended in the suggestiveness of Beckett's affirmative-interrogative title, with its missing question mark.

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MARTINA KOLB

GRAVE ACTION:Last Rites in Brecht's *Mother Courage* and Beckett's *Endgame*.

... all is ... corpsed ...
(Samuel Beckett)¹

Vigorous tenacity versus absurdist lassitude, war history versus post-existentialist stasis, sedulous epic action versus traumatic, post-nuclear paralysis, the kinetic tumult of a crowd versus the threatening silence of only a few *dramatis personae* — there could be, it seems, no more meaningful opposition than that between the works of two of the internationally most influential dramatists of the twentieth century: Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). Such contrasts would surface in most comparisons of the two playwrights' famous plays, for instance if one were to juxtapose *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*) and *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*). This essay, however, is specifically concerned with Brecht's anti-war play *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (*Mother Courage and Her Children*),² composed in 1939 in Scandinavian exile, and Beckett's postwar *Fin de partie* (*Endgame*), written in Paris and published the year Brecht died — in French, the adopted language of the Irish émigré's choice, rather than his native tongue.³

¹ Samuel Beckett, *Endspiel, Fin de partie, Endgame* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974: 44). All references to the play are to this trilingual edition, and indicated in the text as *FP* and respective page numbers. In French, Beckett wrote "Mortibus" — dative or ablative plural of Latin "mors", meaning either the abstract "death" or the concrete "corpse". Beckett himself rendered it as "corpsed" in English, while Elmar Tophoven translated it as German "aus" (*FP* 45). The English neologism is most concrete, strikingly signaling what is at stake in this article: the omnipresence of incapacitation and mutilation, of injury, pain, wounds, bandages, deaths, corpses, shrouds, and burials that mark the settings and the protagonists' predicaments in both dramas.

² Bertolt Brecht, *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder: Eine Chronik aus dem Dreißigjährigen Krieg* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963: 11). All German references to the play are to this edition, and indicated in the text as *MC* and respective page numbers. All English references to the play are to Tony Kushner (Trans.) and Charlotte Ryland (Ed.), *Bertolt Brecht: Mother Courage and Her Children* (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), and indicated in the text as Kushner and respective page numbers.

³ Gathering papers of a Dublin symposium, the International Brecht Society dedicated volume 27 of *The Brecht Yearbook / Das Brecht-Jahrbuch* to this comparison, titling it with an Adornean ring:

It is within the realm of their alleged contrariety — comparison is most compelling, when things appear to be dichotomous at first but less so at second glance — that this contribution focuses on Brecht's and Beckett's key positions of dramatic revolt and theatrical innovation, and, more specifically, on their ultimately engaged ways of handling a prevalent theme in memorable scenes that haunt the minimalist global stages of their plays: the human struggle with the barest and rawest of realities, with the wounded, ailing, dying, and dead body, with shrouding, burying, and mourning. While providing readings of *MC* and *FP* with the theoretical prisms of Brecht's soi-disant *epic* and Beckett's soi-disant *absurd* theater in mind, "Grave Action" hones in on their protagonists' committed as well as omitted climacteric actions. The stress falls on the affect theatrically expressed in the face of pain, and on the ghostly ubiquity of death which both plays — opposed as their authors claimed to be to the illusion of feeling — emphatically convey.

To be sure, beyond the incongruities mentioned initially, there are further characteristics that distinguish *MC* from *FP* — amongst these the post-nuclear setting of Beckett's play, which is deprived of identifiable minutiae and hence geographically flexible. We hear but twice of actual places, first when Hamm's parents reminisce about the Ardennes / Sedan (*FP* 28) and Lake Como (*FP* 32), and later when Hamm in his epic interlude tells us of Kov (*FP* 74). This situation forms a stark contrast to the actual theaters of the Thirty-Years War that provide the historical setting for *MC*, ranging from battlefields of Sweden to those in Germany and Poland. Further, Brecht's epic play is a loose sequence of twelve scenes (Brecht called them *Bilder*) without acts, whereas the tragicomic *FP* is a play in one act, but not subdivided into scenes.⁴ Also, Brecht more radically than Beckett violates the classic doctrine of the three units, and sets *MC* outside. The most domestic locale in the play is nomadic Courage's traveling canteen wagon, which is at the same time her mobile business. Beckett's play, on the

Where Extremes Meet: Rereading Brecht and Beckett. Eds. Anthony Tatlow and Stephen Brockmann (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002). Significantly earlier, Werner Hecht had written on Brecht's unrealized plans to translate *Waiting for Godot*, humorously challenging comparison altogether: "[o]ne can compare virtually everything: the banana with the rhinoceros, the egg-shell with the urn, the recording tape with the palm tree. One can [...] also compare Brecht with Beckett." Werner Hecht, "Brecht und Beckett: Ein absurder Vergleich", *Theater der Zeit* 21.14 (1966: 28). His provocative suggestion of absurdly comparing egg-shells with urns, or, to phrase it differently, wombs with tombs, procreation with decay, seems uncannily apropos for the present discussion.

⁴ The etymology of "scene" is expressive of Brecht's emphasis on theatrical performance over dramatic text, in that "scene" derives from Greek "skene", "stage." Brecht intensifies this visual significance by replacing "Szene" with "Bild", "picture" or "image." The absence of acts is appropriate for Brecht's theater, for "act" derives from Latin "actum", referring to a done deed. Brecht, however, considered action as never complete and necessarily ongoing, beyond a play's alleged end. It is ironic that Beckett's piece is characterized as "a play in one act", since *FP*'s action is neither easy to grasp, nor does it seem to be complete at the play's endpoint. Brecht and Beckett challenge "scene" and "act" as the time-honored subdivisions of dramatic works.

other hand, takes place in the private, interior space of an enclosed room by the sea (plus Clov's adjacent kitchenette, a space apart that remains as hidden from the audience as the interior of Courage's wagon), which is diametrically opposed to Brecht's scenario and evocative of kitchen-sink drama as well as of a bunker or prison cell — the curtained little windows are so far up that Clov needs a step-ladder to look outside, and even the picture faces the wall (*FP* 8).

While Hamm is confronted with his senile parents and ponders on their as well as his own death (he thinks biologically, referring to them as procreating fornicators and part of a universe of stinking corpses, *FP* 18, 20, 66), in *MC*, the three children are murdered rather than a parent — a mother committed to survival at all costs. Moreover, none of the two plays is, traditionally speaking, either a tragedy or a comedy, although despite the survival of the main characters at the end of both plays, the question of their tragic potential has been posed more than once. They are neither tragedies nor comedies, also since ongoing ironies keep mediating between the two genres: Beckett relies on the odd couple, but renders their situation tragicomic, whereas Brecht challenges the implications of the traditional tragic family by lending it a bittersweet comic twist. For example, after Courage's provocative presentation of her story to him, which culminates in her frolicsome debunking of clichés and partially exotic-sounding names, the sergeant sarcastically calls Courage's "[e]ine nette Familie" (*MC* 11; "a nice wholesome family", Kushner, 13), referring to her unconventional past and her children's three different fathers.⁵

However, above and beyond these and likely more discrepancies and incompatibilities, there are crucial elements that the two works share. These commonalities include external factors, such as the fact that both plays are exilic works and premiered abroad, the Hegelian and Marxist dialectics (master and slave), which, to some degree, informs Brecht's drama (Courage as a slave of warfare) and, to a higher degree, Beckett's (Hamm as Clov's master), Brecht's and Beckett's strong interest in parodic Biblical intertexts, and finally, what one may wish to call a lowest common non-Aristotelian denominator. To phrase it differently, *MC* and *FP* give similar twists to the idea of a plot's beginning, middle, and end. Both plays are marked by contradiction and *non sequitur*. Teleology is only an issue in the plays insofar as, along with illusion, needs to be destroyed. Repetition compulsion is evident in the echoed actions and passions of Beckett's and Brecht's protagonists alike, and they likewise portray the idea of beginnings and endings as haunted by paradox: "La fin est dans le commencement et cependant on continue" ("The end is in the beginning and yet you go on", *FP* 96). In a similar vein, *MC*'s last scene mimics the play's beginning, except that it now shows survivor Anna Fierling alone, a dummy master and slave of war, pulling her wagon,

⁵ The theme of parenthood (including adoption) plays a central role in Brecht and Beckett, in and beyond *MC* and *FP*.

painfully rather than courageously immersed in her violently imposed direction, and no longer a mother.

In reference to World War Two and its aftermath, which is the historical context for Brecht's and Beckett's plays, Adorno writes of "Vorgänge, welche eigentlich auch die Überlebenden nicht überleben können" ("events which even the survivors cannot really survive").⁶ For all we know, Courage may start over, or just keep going, which, given the thoroughly brutalized circumstances of her socio-politically dysfunctional world, to which she herself cannot help but contribute, would pretty much yield the same results. The soldiers sing:

Der Feldzug ist noch nicht zu End!
 Das Frühjahr kommt! Wach auf, du Christ!
 Der Schnee schmilzt weg! Die Toten ruhn!
 Und was noch nicht gestorben ist
 Das macht sich auf die Socken nun. (MC 108)

The snow has gone, so draw a breath!
 Let Christian souls crawl out of bed,
 Pull on their socks and conquer death!

The world will end, and time will cease!
 And while we live we buy and sell!
 And in our graves we shall find peace –
 Unless the war goes on in hell! (Kushner 205)⁷

These are the final words of the play, presented in a song that haunts ("*Singen von hinten*" MC 107, "*offstage singing*" Kushner, 203) the beginning of the unpromising future of a woman who lost her son Schweizerkas in Poland, just left behind her

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen", *Noten zur Literatur II* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1961) 192. And Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand Endgame," trans. Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique 26: Critical Theory and Modernity* (1982: 122).

⁷ Brecht's German is typically colloquial ("sich auf die Socken machen") and relies on the final formula of the fairy tale: "Und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind, dann leben sie noch heute" ("And they all lived happily ever after", which unlike the German, does not mention death). Kushner's powerful contemporary adaptation takes many liberties with translation, albeit to an enormous dramatic effect. He not only cuts passages ("Die Toten ruhn!"), while adding others ("Unless the war goes on in hell"), but also literalizes Brecht's vernacular expressions (such as "to pull on socks"). More idiomatic translations of "sich auf die Socken machen" would be "to get weaving", "to cut along", "to take a hike", or "to hit the road". Further, Kushner's version neglects the allusion to a famous German song about Jesus's farewell ("Wach auf, du Christ"), which implies death and sacrifice, and is the very ground for Brecht's parody. Brecht vehemently criticizes such sacrifice through his war-damaged figure of Courage, and had parodied the song even harder in *Die Dreigroschenoper*, where Peachum sings to / of a "rotten Christian" ("Wach auf, du verrotteter Christ").

daughter Kattrin's corpse in Germany, and erroneously believes that her favorite son Eilif is still somewhere among the living.

FP's overture is marked by a desired end, or beginning of the end, with Clov's increasingly less assertive statements parodying the last words of Christ, *consummatum est* (according to the Gospel of John 19:30): "Fini, c'est fini, ça va finir, ça va peut-être finir" ("Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" *FP* 10). As Clov wishes for Hamm to die, and is clearly enraged about his master's stubborn life-force against all the odds, Hamm exasperatedly wonders whether his mother Nell (and that thing called life altogether) will ever be over: "Vous n'avez pas fini? Vous n'allez donc jamais finir? [...] Ça ne va donc jamais finir?" ("Have you not finished? Will you never finish? [...] Will this never finish?" *FP* 36). As the play progresses (for lack of a better word), Nell does Hamm the favor of dying, and Nagg briefly mourns her. Neither Hamm nor Clov, however, are dead at the end of their unending endgame. At best, they mimic death in their two sketchy painterly gestures of theatrical tableaux — Hamm silent, static, and covered, and Clov, although dressed for the road, nonetheless frozen in this instant of pretended departure, likewise speechless and motionless.⁸

In Clov's powerful mnemonic act of repeating a version of Christ's words — words of another that unlike the past aspect of a fulfilled *consummatum est*, move on to the future tense and irresolution of a "peut-être" — suffering is remembered. Parody debases authority and sublimity, but is as much a form of commemoration, memory *ex negativo*, so to speak, but memory nonetheless. Parody is extremely aware of its forerunner, and the words of Clov's precedent are those of Christ on the Cross, the Western symbol of pathos. When Clov expresses his hope for Hamm's end at the very beginning of the play, not only the ashbins are draped, but Hamm was as well, with even his face covered by the very "grand mouchoire sale" ("large dirty handkerchief" *FP* 8) that is to return so triumphantly (as if with a vengeance) in the play's very last lines as the "[v]ieux linge" — the "[o]ld stancher" that the stage directions still call "mouchoir" ("handkerchief", *FP* 118).⁹

MC and *FP* are plays about loss — the loss of language and the language of loss, the loss of sense and coherence, of senses and limbs, of words, movements, and lives. Both works portray the bareness of life, of war and postwar life in particular, and the physical and mental pain it imposes on the living, ailing, and dying. If a difference lies in Brecht's

⁸ This final image is reminiscent of the one in *Waiting for Godot*, where Didi asks Gogo: "Alors, on-y va?" ("Well? Shall we go?"). While Gogo answers affirmatively ("Allons-y." / Yes, let's go"), the stage directions point out that none of the two budges: "Ils ne bougent pas." ("They do not move"). Samuel Beckett, *Warten auf Godot, En attendant Godot, Waiting for Godot* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1971: 232).

⁹ It is interesting to recall in this instant of (un)covering that in spite of the general Christian rejection of nakedness, it is the undraped figure (known as the "Antioch type") that is considered to be the most canonical version of representing the (pathos of the) Crucified. Cf. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: MJF Books, 1956: 231).

criticism of capitalist warfare versus Beckett's rejection of such semantic concreteness, none of the two plays lacks in absurdity, and none of them is "polite" when it comes down to tabooed presentations of life's hard facts.¹⁰ These include blood and wounds, maiming and mutilation, not as deformations from birth, but as the cost of war and the trauma inflicted by it in / and the nuclear age. Most of the characters in the two plays are bleeding and bandaged, disabled, or dying.

Courage's sons are killed and her daughter Kattrin is violated, muted, and eventually shot. In their bellicose men's world, no good deed remains unpunished. Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, are senile folks with failing sight and no legs ("moignons", "stumps" *FP* 20), housed, or practically taken under, stored away, lidded, and sat upon ("Boucle-ie! [...] Assieds-toi dessus" / "Bottle him! [...] Sit on him!" *FP* 20), as Hamm has it, in dustbins that signal premature and undignified burial. Nagg and Nell are proto-waste, and when Hamm encourages Clov to sit on one bin's lid, Clov, who is physically unable to sit, cannot accomplish the task. His misery, if you will, is portrayed hilariously, trans-generically (tragicomically).¹¹ Hamm is blind and can neither stand nor walk, while Clov can stand and walk but not sit. The situation is summarized sardonically: "Chacun sa spécialité" ("Every man his speciality" *FP* 20). And last but not least, even the toy dog lacks a leg and keeps falling over (*FP* 56).

Although most of these pains and cruelties are presented seemingly lightly, Brecht and Beckett hardly make light of suffering. In fact, the opposite. The former's technique of de-familiarization (*Verfremdung*) finds some correspondence in the latter's

¹⁰ Although he points to further specificities and intricacies of the "absurd" afterwards, in his introduction to *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin, who coined the titular term, mentions various implications of the "absurd", among these "out of harmony with reason" as well as Eugène Ionesco's understanding of the term as "devoid of purpose", which results in loss and the absurdity of human action and the human condition. *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Woodstock/NY: The Overlook Press, 1973: 5).

¹¹ The idea of sitting on somebody to keep her or him down or under, as if in wrestling, is similarly expressed as the tyrannical father's fear in Franz Kafka's "Das Urteil" ("The Judgment"), where the father senses that his son wants him to die (as Hamm, who points out that he has been a father to Clov, assumes that Clov wants him to die). In Kafka's story, the old father stays in a dark, high-walled room, wears a heavy gown, has white hair, no teeth, and a tired face. His head sinks upon his chest on occasion. The son lifts the father from his armchair, takes off his gown, pants, and socks (gets him "ready", as it were, as Hamm asks Clov to get him "ready", *FP* 12), and carries him to bed. The father clings to his watch chain (as Hamm clings to his whistle) and once in bed, covers himself, asking his son to make sure that he is covered well. When the son confirms, the father, in a fit, throws back the cover, stands upright on his bed, and accuses his son of wanting to take him under (cover him) all too soon. In the end, the son likely dies in an absurd accident on a bridge, the father falls heavily upon his bed, and a frightened servant covers her face with an apron. In the context of dying and shrouding, there is clearly more than one parallel between Kafka's story and Beckett's play, including the absence of certainty regarding the characters' deaths. Cf. Franz Kafka, "Das Urteil", *Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1998: 47-60). Beyond this comparison, Kafka and Beckett share a similar sense of dark humor and love of incongruity/tragicomedy.

inscription of tragicomedy. Neither Brecht nor Beckett deploys big words; instead, they both prefer the idiomatic power of the vernacular, which they often literalize into ferocious parodies beyond twisted pleasantries and bourgeois sensibilities. “It was out of respect for the audience”, according to Peter Brook, “that Brecht introduced the idea of alienation, for alienation is a call to a halt: alienation is cutting, interrupting, holding something up to the light, making us look again.”¹²

Brecht and Beckett, when composing scenes of death and dying, practice their own techniques of distancing that result in their audiences being pulled out of their cushy complacency, out of the convenience of their hardly committed comfort zones. Brook writes:

A girl, raped, walks on to a stage in tears — and if her acting touches us sufficiently, we automatically accept the implied conclusion that she is a victim [...]. But suppose a clown were to follow her, mimicking her tears, and suppose by his talent he succeeds in making us laugh. His mockery destroys our first response. Then where do our sympathies go? The truth of her character, the validity of her position, are both put into question by the clown, and at the same time our own easy sentimentality is exposed. If carried far enough, such a series of events can suddenly make us confront our shifting views of right and wrong. (Brook 81)

While in this section on “The Rough Theatre”, Brook’s concern is Brecht, distance by the mocking of violence and employed in order to reach a destruction of clichéd sentimentality and indiscriminate judgment, also applies to Beckett’s *FP*, where visceral pain is captured from a distance, and where laughter, if not sympathetic (and not

¹² Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London and New York: Penguin, 2008: 81). Brook’s using the common English translation *alienation* for Brecht’s *Verfremdung* renders his point slightly ambiguous. Both, *Verfremdung* and *Entfremdung* have been translated as *alienation* in English, which has caused some confusion in understanding the precise meaning of Brecht’s concept. Distinguishing *Entfremdung* (*alienation*) from *Verfremdung* (*de-familiarization*) is paramount, since Brecht announced in no uncertain terms a deliberate de-familiarizing of what is familiar, rather than voicing a concern with an existentialist crisis. Brecht believed before Adorno that without art, alienation is total — and that without de-familiarization, alienation goes unnoticed. Cf. Gerd Rienäcker, “Verfremdung, der Entfremdung zu begegnen”, *Helene Weigel (1900-1971): Unerbittlich das Richtige zeigend* (Berlin: Stiftung Akademie der Künste, 2000: 101-103). The instrumentalized distance inherent in the techniques of epic de-familiarization, of which not only the numerous songs in *MC*, but also Hamm’s and Nagg’s storytelling in *FP* are fine examples, is an antipode to alienation, precisely because such detachment motivates active reflection. In this vein, one can say that *FP* is not first and foremost a play about alienated existence, in that it operates with post-Brechtian mechanisms of epic distance in order to drive home another truth. Adorno, as a matter of fact, characterized the situation in *FP* as parodic of existentialism: “Parodiert ist der Existentialismus selber; von seinen Invarianten bleibt nichts übrig als das Existenzminimum” (Adorno 191), and Adorno/Jones 121: “Existentialism itself is parodied; nothing remains of its ‘invariants’ other than minimal existence.” For a summary of Brecht’s de-familiarization, cf. Martina Kolb, “Verfremdungseffekt” (forthcoming in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism online*, ed. Stephen Ross, 2015).

meeting Hamm's grandiose desire for compassion), may eventually turn cathartic. Comedy is an outlet for repressed emotion, a place where catharsis through laughter may happen, and where Clov is "der Clown, dem man den Endbuchstaben abgeschnitten hat" ("the clown, whose last letter has been severed", Adorno 226 and Adorno/Jones 144). *Then where do our sympathies go*, to repeat Brook's words, in the scenes of death and burial in *MC* and *FP*? While laughter and other forms of interruption play crucial roles in Brecht's and Beckett's dramaturgies, and while their opposition to bourgeois theater and their questioning of popular morality are comparably radical, the concern with death and burial that they have both written into their characters is steeped in another cultural tradition: that of the last rite — either granted or refused.

In an expectedly unconventional sort of will (but will nonetheless), Murphy asks for the following, in a note Neary reads out to Celia after the identification of Murphy's badly burnt body:

With regard to the disposal of these my body, mind, and soul, I desire that they be burnt and placed in a paper bag and brought to the Abbey Theatre, Lr. Abbey Street, Dublin, and without pause into what the great and good Lord Chesterfield calls the necessary house, where their happiest hours have been spent, on the right, as one goes down into the pit, and I desire that the chain be there pulled upon them, if possible during the performance of a piece, the whole to be executed without ceremony or show of grief.¹³

This moment in the novel portrays the habitual degree of self-irony and irreverence, and at the same time betrays his desire for his future ashes to be placed in the way that Murphy considers best — flushed down the toilet. Although Miss Counihan says that she considers Murphy's "last wish sacred" and is "bound to honour it", she quickly proceeds to the idea of "dump[ing] anywhere" (272) a bag, which, for the scarcity of "receptacle[s] for refuse" Cooper ends up "freely distribut[ing] over the floor of the saloon" (*Murphy* 270-275). Murphy's wish implied a return to Ireland (but the ashes do not make it) and is at the same time a paradoxical reminder to forget commemoration. Murphy wants to end at home, and is bent on ensuring some ritual for what has yet to happen: his death. Murphy's lines imply a preventively ordered last rite in the guise of a last will that simultaneously interrupts and continues tradition. With it, Beckett characteristically renders his protagonist's prophylactically arranged rite hilarious, by way of de-familiarization.

Although presented far more sardonically, Murphy's unfulfilled wish is reminiscent of Hamm's, whose sentimental inquiry about Mother Pegg, which Clov answers with the news of the light being extinguished, is marked, and motivated, by his deepest desire for Pegg's and his own diligent burial:

¹³ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove Press, 1970: 269).

Hamm: Il y a de la lumière chez la Mère Pegg?
 Clov: De la lumière! Comment veux-tu qu'il y ait de la lumière chez quelqu'un?
 Hamm: Alors elle s'est éteinte.
 Clov: Mais bien sûr qu'elle s'est éteinte! S'il n'y en a plus c'est qu'elle s'est éteinte.
 Hamm: Non, je veux dire la Mère Pegg.
 Clov: Mais bien sûr qu'elle s'est éteinte! Qu'est-ce que tu as aujourd'hui?
 Hamm: Je suis mon cours. *Un temps*. On l'a enterrée?
 Clov: Enterrée! Qui veux-tu qui l'enterre?
 Hamm: Toi.
 Clov: Moi! Je n'ai pas assez à faire sans enterrer les gens?
 Hamm: Mais moi tu m'enterreras.
 Clov: Mais non, je ne t'enterrerai pas!

Hamm: Is Mother Pegg's light on?
 Clov: Light! How could anyone's light be on?
 Hamm: Extinguished!
 Clov: Naturally it's extinguished. If it's not on, it's extinguished.
 Hamm: No, I mean Mother Pegg.
 Clov: But naturally she's extinguished! What's the matter with you today?
 Hamm: I'm taking my course. *Pause*. Is she buried?
 Clov: Buried! Who would have buried her?
 Hamm: You.
 Clov: Me! Haven't I enough to do without burying people?
 Hamm: But you'll bury me.
 Clov: No, I shan't bury you. (*FP 60-62*)¹⁴

Beckett's play with the literal and metaphorical implications of light (Pegg's bulb or lamp, on the one hand, and the light of her life, on the other) is reminiscent of Shakespeare's famous double entendre in *Othello* V, 2 ("put out the light, and then put out the light"). It is through Beckett's play on the word "lumière" that the plain, if putative truth (for lack of a better word) is driven home to Hamm, as Clov fashions himself as one who is too busy to have time to take care of, care for, or bury people. In fact, his same industriousness is mentioned earlier, when he similarly refuses to cover Hamm and get him ready for bed:

Hamm: Prépare-moi, je vais me coucher.
 Clov: Je viens de te lever.
 Hamm: Et après?
 Clov: Je ne peux pas te lever et te coucher toutes les cinq minutes, j'ai à faire.

Hamm: Get me ready. I'm going to bed.

¹⁴ "Shan't" (shall not) signals more strongly the component of Clov's adamant refusal than "won't" (will not) or the French future tense.

Clov: I've just got you up.

Hamm: And what of it?

Clov: I can't be getting you up and putting you to bed every five minutes. I have things to do. (FP 12)

Ironically, while the servant Clov, in Hegelian manner, is not only defined by his relationship to his master, Hamm, but also by his work (he repeatedly points out that he has got things to take care of), his only transparent labor consists in catering to none other than Hamm, something that he keeps doing obediently, or so he says, except for the refusal to cover and promise to bury him later-on.¹⁵ Even if Clov wanted to bury Hamm, his means, for all we know, would be limited: one has not only run out of rugs and pain-killers, but of coffins as well (FP 94, 100 and 108). Among the many items that are no longer available (including pap, bicycle wheels, nature), these three missing objects (rugs, pain-killers, coffins) specifically refer to cold, pain, and death.

Clov states that he did not bury Pegg, will not bury Hamm, and makes clear that he finds Hamm's questions in this regard outrageous, which is evident in his return questions to Hamm ending with exclamation rather than question marks ("De la lumière!" / "Enterrée!" / "Moi!"). Between assuring Clov that all he is doing is taking his course, and his mention of burial, Hamm pauses a first time, before this disheartening dialogue ends with yet another pensive pause on Hamm's part, now one that immediately precedes his recollection of how much fun Pegg used to be back in the days when everybody was younger, and together with his related identification and self-pity constitutes Hamm's most affectively charged preoccupation in the entire play: that of his undraped and unburied body. Clov's scaremongering words are his only source of power vis-à-vis Hamm, and yes, they do thoroughly thwart Hamm's expectations — and come to pass. Eventually, Clov declines Hamm's request for an anticipated last rite:

Hamm: Encore une chose. *Clov s'arrête.* Une dernière grâce. *Clov sort.* Cache-moi sous le drap. *Un temps long.* Non? Bon. *Un temps.* A moi. *Un temps.* De jouer. *Un temps.* Avec lassitude: Vieille fin de partie perdue, finir de perdre.

Hamm: One thing more. *Clov halts.* A last favor. *Exit Clov.* Cover me with the sheet. *Long pause.* No? Good. *Pause.* Me to play. *Pause.* *Wearily:* Old endgame lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing. (FP 114)

Hamm deeply wishes for Clov to have granted Pegg the proper rite, and immediately distracts himself from the indubitable pathos of his own looming predicament (an unburied corpse), by thinking of livelier times past. If Clov wants for

¹⁵ As Clov keeps himself busy running around in circles, if you will, Courage, too, is a slave, in her case to a master called war. She, too, is defined by her master as well as by her work for that master. Her business and industriousness seem just as ludicrous, albeit for other reasons than Clov's.

Hamm to end, Hamm's own desire for his end, in spite of his emotive appeal to Clov to put him in his coffin (*FP* 108), remains far more ambiguous than his desire for his parents' deaths. And while Clov finds the end (also that of Hamm's story) terrific, Hamm prefers the middle, which he states immediately before the epic instance (in Brecht's understanding of the term) of the story that he forces upon Clov (and not for the first time) about a man crawling on his belly, on the brink of death (*FP* 72):

Clov: La fin est inouïe.

Hamm: Je préfère le milieu.

Clov: The end is terrific!

Hamm: I prefer the middle. (*FP* 68)

If Hamm's wish for the end appears to be uncertain, his desire for the end to be properly ritualized is clear. Hamm, in other words, believes that a corpse needs to be buried. That Brecht's *Courage* should not herself be able to bury any of her brutally killed three children, leaves one with a comparable plethora of questions about death and burial, mourning and dignity. *Courage* is absent when her children die (and never properly learns of Eilif's execution), only sees two of the three children's bodies (Schweizerkas's and Kattrin's), and only tends to one, her daughter's, before handing it over to the farmers for burial, whereas the corpse of Schweizerkas is thrown upon a piece of common land, where cadavers are left at the mercy of scavengers.

The last rite does not always come timely. It can be an anticipated, premature ritual that expresses someone's death fantasies and anxieties, or it can be a retrospective, even retroactive rite initially denied. Instances of the former are Beckett's *Murphy* and *Hamm*, and the father in *Kafka's* story, whereas the latter is connected with sacrifice, and examples of it are *Palinurus* in the *Aeneid* and *Elpenor* in the *Odyssey* (his shade pleads with *Odysseus* to grant him proper burial), and *Brecht's Courage*, who eventually grants to her daughter what in the name of her own survival she had not provided for her son: the acknowledgment and shrouding of the body.¹⁶

¹⁶ Cf. *Virgil, The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York, Toronto and London: Penguin, 2006) 181: "[O]h, *Palinurus* [...] Your naked corpse will lie on an unknown shore." Cf. *Homer, The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York, Toronto and London: Penguin, 1996) 251: "He'd [*Elpenor*] not been buried under the wide ways of earth, / not yet, we'd left his body [...] unwept, unburied — this other labor pressed us. / But I wept to see him now, pity touched my heart [...]" And *Elpenor* replies (251-252): "remember me, I beg you! Don't sail off / and desert me, left behind unwept, unburied, don't [...] No, burn me in full armor [...] so even men to come will learn my story. / Perform my rites, and plant on my tomb that oar / I swung with mates when I rowed among the living." *Ezra Pound* refers to *Elpenor* in the first *Canto* in this precise context of initially refused burial: "Unburied, cast on the wide earth, / Limbs that we left in the house of *Circe*, / Unwept, unwrapped in sepulchre, since toils urged other." Cf. *Ezra Pound, The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1998: 4). *Pound's* addition of "unwrapped" is especially compelling for the present discussion.

The timing of the rite is ambiguous, and so is its precise location in life or death. Rites of passage are irreversible moments ritualized ceremoniously in transitional, transferential spaces, and are, as such, fictional in nature, located, or suspended, in “third” realms, where one is no longer one (alive, warm), but also not quite the other (dead, cold, buried, gone).

Covering, wrapping, draping, or shrouding — be it of a child or an elderly person, a patient or a corpse — is a gesture of care, of showing care, of externalizing concern. Such care and concern expressed in the act of covering or shrouding a body — dead or alive, another’s or one’s own — signals an attempt at providing privacy (at covering nudity and restraining voyeurism), at reducing a person’s further exposure to cold, sight or other infliction (including an intrusion by the draper’s own desire), at limiting the results of further harm by way of inserting a shielding layer of protection. In sum, the cover separates subject and object.¹⁷

Not only Hamm himself is freezing when Clov tells him that Nagg’s crying over Nell’s passing had already ended (and that covers were no longer available), but also his parents are cold, who lost their “guibolles” (“shanks”, *FP* 28) in a nevertheless exuberantly remembered tandem accident, and now ask one another about that part of their well-being, while considering the withdrawal of their amputated bodies into their respective dustbin:

Nagg: Tu as froid?
 Nell: Oui, très froid. Et toi?
 Nagg: Je gèle. *Un temps*. Tu veux rentrer?

Nagg: Are you cold?
 Nell: Yes, perished. And you? *Pause*.
 Nagg: I’m freezing. *Pause*. Do you want to go in? (*FP* 28)

While the gesture of shielding living bodies suffering from cold or pain is largely driven by practical and therapeutic considerations, the shrouding of corpses betrays a more complex sense of care. As it expresses affliction, anguish and distress, it does so in a state of shock and confusion. On the one hand, there is the survivor’s awareness that dead bodies no longer feel the same cold or pain they did when alive, but on the other hand, this knowledge is repressed in favor of the mourner’s illusion that (s)he may not only still be able to express care belatedly, but that the warmth and protection thus provided has a measurable effect not only on the provider, whose actual desire is veiled by shrouding, but on the dead body as well. The last gesture of covering is spurred by altruistic (taking care of the corpse) as well as egotistic (self-care) concerns, and the moment of covering the body before its burial is the last possible instant to physically

¹⁷ A “shroud”, other than protecting the corpse, separates the living from the dead. The word is a derivative of Old English “scrud”, which refers to cutting (“to shred”).

express one's care (while simultaneously taking precautions against desire), to be in direct contact with the one who has departed, who is deceased, or has passed, as we euphemistically put it, but is still physically present one last time, as a corpse, before the final placement in the tomb.¹⁸

If deaths and burials, including those of army officers (such as for instance Tilly's "hohe Leich" (MC 65; "estimable corpse", Kushner 117) permeate the entire play, Brecht's more memorable portrayal of loss and death in MC is concentrated in scenes one, three, eight, eleven, and twelve, where, one by one, Courage loses all her children. In the very first scene "kommt ein Sohn abhanden" (MC 7; "Courage loses a son", Kushner 5) — her older and favorite son Eilif — and the mother is characterized as "schmerzensreiche Gebälerin" (MC 716; "My womb only gave me grief after grief after grief!", Kushner 21). This expression is conventionally deployed only in reference to the Pietà as "mother of sorrows," a gesture of mordent piety and provocative allusion on Brecht's part that is lost in Kushner's translation. As Courage is distracted while haggling about a buckle, Eilif can be unresistingly recruited, and from this moment of his departure on, the audience intimates his imminent death. Eventually, the crisis becomes self-fulfilling. As a result of everybody being at a loss as to how to break the bad news to her, the fact of his execution never properly reaches Courage.

In a similar set-up, Courage's younger son Schweizerkas dies as a consequence of her too extensive bargaining. When the bier with his corpse is carried in front of her, she holds her daughter's hand,¹⁹ as the sheet that covers the young man's body is being lifted:

Zwei Landknechte kommen mit einer Bahre, auf der unter einem Laken etwas liegt. Nebenher geht der Feldweibel. Sie setzen die Bahre nieder.

Der Feldweibel: Da is einer, von dem wir nicht seinen Namen wissen. Er muß aber notiert werden, daß alles in Ordnung geht. Bei dir hat er eine Mahlzeit genommen. Schau ihn dir an, ob du ihn kennst. *Er nimmt das Laken weg.* Kennst du ihn? *Mutter Courage schüttelt den Kopf.* Was, du hast ihn nie gesehn, vor er bei dir eine Mahlzeit genommen hat? *Mutter Courage schüttelt den Kopf.* Hebt ihn auf. Gebt ihn auf den Schindanger. Er hat keinen, der ihn kennt. *Sie tragen ihn weg.* (MC 53-54)

Two soldiers enter with a stretcher on which something is lying, covered with a sheet. The Sergeant follows. They put the stretcher on the ground.

The Sergeant: Here's somebody, we don't know his name. It's got to be entered in the record, everything in its place. He bought a meal from you. Look and see if you know him. *He takes the sheet away.* Know him? *Mother Courage shakes her head.* You never saw him before you served him

¹⁸ Similar to covering or draping, an embalming ointment can be applied to both, the living and the dead, with the prospect of therapeutic and protective effects in the case of the former, and as the last rite of the extreme unction in the case of the latter.

¹⁹ When Hamm is cold and informed of Nagg's short-lived mourning for Nell (and of the absence of rugs or covers), he asks Clov for his hand or a kiss, thus expressing his desperate desire for warmth and intimacy (FP 94).

supper? *Mother Courage shakes her head*. Lift him up. Throw him in the pit. He's got no one who knows him. *They carry him away*. (Kushner 95)

When confronted with her son's corpse, Courage is explicitly asked to look at him. In order to secure her survival, however, she twice refuses to recognize his body. She answers the sergeant's questions negatively, if silently, with a repeated shaking of her head. Her disavowal is twofold: she not only twice refuses to identify him and herself as his mother, but at the same time also denies her son's corpse as a site of severe crisis. As a result, his body is carried off and thrown upon the "Schindanger" anonymously, while Courage prepares herself for the famous song of great capitulation — and moves on.²⁰

The first postwar production of *MC* took place after Brecht's and Helene Weigel's return from their Californian exile, in East Berlin in 1949. On this occasion, Weigel performed one of her most spectacular moments on stage, sounding the depths of Courage's act of denial, while performing her ingenuous painterly gesture of the *stummer Schrei* ("mute scream"). This putative scream was an almost sculpted gesture in stillness: Weigel sitting motionless, her head thrown back, her mouth agape, her hands resting on her lap. She invented this gesture to represent Courage's shock – and dilemma – in the face of her son's death, and her refusal to affectively acknowledge or verbally express the violence of a war that is at the same time her livelihood. Reminiscent of Beckett's dialogues, speech and silence powerfully coalesce in *MC*.²¹ Rather than evoking proximity or empathy, however, the image of the mute scream concentrates its energies on distance and mimicry: it resembles a skull and imitates, remembers, foreshadows, and probably even mocks death.²²

²⁰ Brecht's word is "Schindanger", which Kushner renders as "pit." More precisely, "Schindanger" used to be a piece of common land, where dead cattle was flayed and animal cadavers were planted. Such plots also served for the planting of criminals, prostitutes, actors, or suicides, who were denied a Christian burial — a denial that equals a *post-mortem* excommunication as a penal insult to the dead and a warning deterrence to the living.

²¹ Cf. Leslie Kane, *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (Rutherford, Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, and London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982: 108). Kane assembles "dramatists of the unspoken," but does not include Brecht, who generally counts among the outspoken. As a result of his alleged outspokenness, however, it is all the more conspicuous that he made Kattrin mute and had Courage refuse words in crucial moments of utmost crisis (shaking her head rather than speaking). Brecht's politicized response to and his respective representations of suffering are related. Cf. Raymond Williams on Brecht's "rejection of tragedy", in *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford University Press, 1966: 190-204).

²² Cf. Martina Kolb, "The Mask as Interface: Brecht, Weigel and the Sounding of Silence," *Communications from the International Brecht Society* 34 (June 2005: 80-93, especially 82-83). When Eilif pays his visit just before his execution, his face is "kalkweiß" and foreshadows his death (*MC* 86; "chalk-white" Kushner 157). Such approximations of the skull also appear in the form of Nagg's and Nell's nightcaps and "teint[s] très blanc[s]" ("very white face[s]") and their and Hamm's yawning (*FP* 10, 18, 24-25), as well as in Hamm's various imitations and intimations of death. Variations on this condensed image permeate Beckett's dramatic work. Another instance is in "... but the clouds ..."

Courage is happy about Eilif's announced visit, but nevertheless goes to town to do business, not knowing that he was only to return for one final farewell before his execution:

Der Feldprediger: Der Eilif!

Von Soldaten mit Piketten gefolgt, kommt Eilif daher. Seine Hände sind gefesselt. Er ist kalkweiß. [...]

Eilif: Wo ist die Mutter?

Der Feldprediger: In die Stadt.

Eilif: Ich hab gehört, sie ist am Ort. Sie haben erlaubt, daß ich sie noch besuchen darf.

Der Koch *zu den Soldaten*: Wo führt ihr ihn denn hin?

Ein Soldat: Nicht zum Guten.

Der Feldprediger: Was hat er angestellt?

Der Soldat: Bei einem Bauern ist er eingebrochen. Die Frau ist hin.

Der Feldprediger: Wie hast du das machen können?

Eilif: Ich hab nix andres gemacht als vorher auch.

Der Koch: Aber im Frieden.

Eilif: Halt das Maul. Kann ich mich hinsetzen, bis sie kommt?

Der Soldat: Wir haben keine Zeit.

[...]

Der Feldprediger: Und was solln wir deiner Mutter ausrichten?

Eilif: Sag ihr, es war nichts anderes, sag ihr, es war dasselbe. Oder sag ihr gar nix.

Die Soldaten treiben ihn weg.

[...]

Der Koch *ruft ihnen nach*: Ich werds ihr doch sagen müssen, sie wird ihn noch sehn wollen!

Der Feldprediger: Sagen Sie ihr lieber nix. Höchstens, er war da und kommt wieder, vielleicht morgen. Inzwischen bin ich zurück und kanns ihr beibringen. (MC 86-87)

The Chaplain: I think it's Eilif.

A grim contingent of Soldiers with pikes leading Eilif, whose hands are tied. He's chalk-white. [...]

Eilif: Where's my mother?

The Chaplain: In town.

Eilif: I heard she was here. They let me come to see her.

The Cook *to the Soldiers*: Where are you taking him?

A Soldier: No place good.

The Chaplain: What did he do?

The Soldier: He broke into a farmhouse. The wife – (*Gestures to indicate she's dead*).

The Chaplain: You did that? How could you do that?

Eilif: Same as I've always done.

The Cook: But it's peacetime. You can't –

Eilif: Shut up. Can I sit till she comes back?

The Soldier: We don't have time for that.

[...]

where the protagonist wears a "skullcap." Cf. Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006: 417).

The Chaplain: What should we tell your mother?

Eilif: Tell her it wasn't different. Tell her it was the same. Or don't tell her anything.

The Soldiers shove him and he starts to walk.

[...]

The Cook (*calling after the Chaplain*): I have to tell her, she'll want to see him!

The Chaplain: Better not say anything. Or he was here and he'll be back, tomorrow possibly. When I get back I'll find some way to explain. (Kushner 157-159)²³

Eilif was not going to return, even though a part of Courage is set to believe in his survival all the way to the play's bitter end. The chaplain recommends that it is best not to inform Courage, and the cook looks into Courage's canteen wagon and finds Kattrin there, her head covered with a blanket (MC 88). Her gesture of hiding behind a layer of protective fabric is another instance of imitation: she may well cover herself not only in shock about Eilif's violence (Kattrin herself was violated), but also in anticipation of Eilif's and her own impending deaths. Presumably, his body was not to be granted a last rite, while Kattrin was cared for by Courage and the farmers.

At the end of MC, mute Kattrin unremittingly drums to save, as it were, the children that she cannot have (while the prayers by the others have no effect whatsoever). She is repeatedly advised to stop, but indefatigably continues, and is eventually shot on the roof top from which she was accomplishing her mission. While Courage succeeds in saving her own life but not that of her children, Kattrin manages to save the city but not herself, and when her mother returns from town, she finds Kattrin's body on the ground:

Vor dem Planwagen hockt Mutter Courage bei ihrer Tochter. Die Bauersleute daneben.

[...]

Mutter Courage: Vielleicht schläft sie mir ein. *Sie singt:*

[...] Eia popeia / Was raschelt im Stroh / Der eine liegt in Polen [Schweizerkas] / Der andre [Eilif] ist werweißwo. [...]

²³ Brecht's text does not explicitly speak of rape, but the case is clear: Eilif broke into a farmer's house and raped and ruined a woman (likely the farmer's wife) during a short-lived peacetime of which Eilif was unaware (the German "hin" may mean "dead", but could also mean "ruined" or "broken"). He is about to be executed for his crime. The brutal irony Brecht portrays is that in times of war, rapes committed by soldiers (including Eilif's) were not only habitual and went unpunished, but rapists were honored on occasion ("Im Krieg haben sie ihn dafür geehrt" MC 87; "During the war he got medals for things like this", Kushner 159). That Eilif is a criminal complicates our sense of him, our sense of Courage's loss of him, and our sense of his imminent execution. Eilif being a rapist awaiting execution de-automatizes the audience's reaction and enhances reflection (in Peter Brook's sense). This distance is also the result of Brecht's ironies opening up ethical gray zones. None of Courage's sons is killed in action; rather, both die as a consequence of so-called misunderstandings or the absence of a certain piece of knowledge. The audience's sympathies for Courage (or absence or wavering sense thereof) are now subject to far more complex reflection.

Der Bauer: Wenns nicht in die Stadt gegangen wärn, Ihren Schnitt machen, wärs vielleicht nicht passiert.

Mutter Courage: Jetzt schläft sie.

Die Bäuerin: Sie schläft nicht, Sie müssens einsehen, sie ist hinüber.

Der Bauer: Und Sie selber müssen los endlich. Da sind die Wölf, und was schlimmer ist, die Marodöre.

Mutter Courage: Ja.

Sie geht und holt eine Blache aus dem Wagen, um die Tote zuzudecken.

Die Bäuerin: Habens denn niemand sonst? Wos hingehen könnten?

Mutter Courage: Doch, einen. Den Eilif.

Der Bauer *während Mutter Courage die Tote zudeckt*: Den müssens finden. Für die da sorgen wir, daß sie ordentlich begraben wird. Da könnens ganz beruhigt sein.

Mutter Courage: Da haben Sie Geld für die Auslagen. *Sie zählt dem Bauer Geld in die Hand. Der Bauer und sein Sohn geben ihr die Hand und tragen Kattrin weg.*

(MC 106-107)

Alongside the wagon, Mother Courage sits, bent over her daughter. The farm couple stands nearby.

[...]

Mother Courage: Maybe she's sleeping. Sings:

[...] Eia popeia, / I see your eyes close. / One kid lies in Poland [Schweizerkas]. The other [Eilif] – well, who knows? [...] ²⁴

The Farmer: You had to go to town to hunt for bargains, maybe if you'd been here none of this would have happened.

Mother Courage: Now she's sleeping.

The Farmer's Wife: She isn't sleeping, stop saying that and look, she's gone.

The Farmer: And you have to go too. There are wolves around here, and people who're worse than the wolves.

Mother Courage: Yes.

She goes to the wagon and brings out a sheet.

The Farmer's Wife: Do you have anyone left? Anyone you could go to?

Mother Courage: One left. Eilif.

She uses the sheet to wrap Kattrin's body.

The Farmer: You've got to go find him then. We'll take care of her, she'll have a decent burial. Don't worry.

Mother Courage: Here's the money for what it costs.

She gives the Farmer some money. The Farmer and his Son shake her hand and carry Kattrin's body away. (Kushner 201-203) ²⁵

At first, Courage wishes for Kattrin to fall asleep, singing Brecht's parody of a famous lullaby whose lyrics summarize all her losses; then Courage pretends that

²⁴ The German text explicitly says "ist", thus expressing Courage's belief that one lies dead and the other is alive, while Kushner's translation is elliptic, thereby insinuating Eilif's death as parallel to and repetitive of Schweizerkas's.

²⁵ As a matter of fact, now *she's got no one who knows her*, to repeat the sergeant's words following Courage's earlier disavowal of Schweizerkas.

Katrin is asleep (as if relying on the ancient idea of death, *thanatos*, as the brother of sleep, *hypnos*); and at last, upon the farmer's wife's merciless instigation, Courage fetches a sheet and covers her daughter's dead body. Although she eventually hands the body to the farmers for a "decent burial" in yet another moment of transaction (she pays them), Courage is the one to initiate the last rite by draping the corpse in the precise moment she acknowledges Katrin's death. If this rite communicates the sense of an ending, it simultaneously acknowledges her vulnerability and visualizes the mental pain of ongoing separation. The shroud is a "Blache" of the kind that also covers Courage's wagon, and is certainly intended to preserve and protect Katrin's body, as well as to hide it from the onlookers' sight, which implies a sense of dignity in the act of avoiding the shame and insult that Katrin already endured during her life, and that Schweizerkas's unburied corpse was exposed to as well.

Degraded, Schweizerkas's corpse decayed on the piece of common land and just as that of Nell (and presumably of Nagg as well) in waste bins seems repulsive and undignified. This lack of dignity is starkly opposed to a decently carried out last rite, which usually implies a form of shrouding. Insofar as the shroud is the object onto which the survivor's emotion is projected — and the object that is handled in a way to enable hope and dignity — it does not surprise that the world's most famous shroud receives the amount of attention it does (of researchers and believers alike). The alleged burial cloth of Christ is on display in Turin, a precious sheet known as the *santa sindone* ("holy shroud"). This cloth is not only an affectively charged object of desire, but also an item surrounded by controversy and debate. Turin's *sindone* counts as the most studied object in human history, even though ongoing scientific research has heretofore not been in a position to prove that the shroud is that of Christ. Although there is not even a consensus on how the image on the cloth was created, millions ascribe profound meaning to their belief that it is the sheet that once wrapped Christ. All the Gospels mention the shrouding of the body of Jesus, so that the pronounced interest in the shroud's authenticity and the desire to be in contact with the materialized signs of traumatic pain and suffering are textually explicable.

The fetishized Turin shroud is not only evidence of long-gone pain and passing, but also of dignity. A fetishist's ambiguous stance toward absence and presence is crucial in this context. As an object of condensed force that crystallizes desire, as well as an object of subjective reverence, the fetish is a metonymic compromise that at once reveals and blocks the awareness of loss, and enables the simultaneous existence of "Verleugnung" / "disavowal" — in the case of the shroud, the denial of death as finite, of the absence of the body, and of the end of life — and the "Anerkennung" / "affirmation" of presence — in the case of the shroud, the marks of somebody's body, and possibly Christ's, who died in great pain.²⁶

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Fetischismus", *Studienausgabe* III, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich et al. (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1997: 384 and 388). And Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," *The Standard Edition*

The shroud is linked to desire, and its subtle marks are diametrically opposed to the blood-stained handkerchief that is rather less appealing, and that nobody but Hamm himself first removes from, and eventually puts back on his face (FP 10 and 118) — the two principal physical actions Hamm takes on his own. In this context, Adorno mentions an “Identitätsverlust des Gesichts”, “Verhülltheit [...] eines Toten”, and “den Lebendigen [...] schon unter die Leichen einreih[en]” (“the face’s loss of identity”, “concealed is the face of a dead man”, and “plac[ing man] already among corpses”, Adorno 207 and Adorno/Jones 131). Hamm emphatically holds on to his “old stancher” as his last possession, ready to utter the final words of Beckett’s play:

Hamm: Vieux linge! *Un temps*. Toi — je te garde.

Hamm: Old stancher! *Pause*. You ... remain. (FP 118)

He holds the cloth spread out before himself, prior to covering his face with it, remaining motionless in his wheel chair, and mimicking death in the exact same way he had done in the play’s opening, when Clov removed the sheet that had covered Hamm, while Hamm himself lifted the blood-stained handkerchief from his face. Herbert Blau has referred to this final image as “the cryptic sufferance of the last rites when, the circuit of pain restored, he [Hamm] seems to acknowledge another presence abjected onto himself.”²⁷ The play, in any case, “closes on this final image: Clov intent on Hamm, as he was at the play’s beginning; the chess pieces suggested by the title have moved back into their opening positions, much like those commanded by Mr Endon in *Murphy*. Yet, even here, Beckett adds considerable ambiguity to the repetition. The relation between Hamm and Clov has shifted. Nell is dead in her dustbin. As with Godot, *Endgame*’s world is both changing and changeless.”²⁸

When survivors dress corpses in wedding suits or dresses with their faces made up, they carry out an action that performs utmost denial. Such action is diametrically opposed to Hamm’s presentation of the soi-disant abject, as well as to cremation. Making up bodies clearly speaks to the survivors’ disavowal of death, as it caters to the illusion of life and addresses, in a somewhat macabre way and prematurely, the aesthetic concern vis-à-vis a body’s physical decay. Cremating corpses is the other end of the scale, as it results in the undoing of the body’s material, while preventing the hygienic issues of decomposition. Human dignity and other ethical and psychological concerns somewhat prosaically overlap in this context with aesthetic and hygienic issues of care. If dignity is hard to define, its relationship with worthiness, respect,

of the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* XXI. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1961: 153 and 156).

²⁷ Herbert Blau, “Quaquaquaqu: The Babel of Beckett,” *The World of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Joseph H. Smith (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991: 15).

²⁸ David Pattie, *The Complete Guide to Samuel Beckett* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000: 77).

affection, integrity, empathy, and perhaps courage is evident, and these ideas are intimately intertwined with that of granting a decent burial.²⁹

Throughout *MC*, Courage is touched by death in more than one sense, and at the end of the play, she is technically no longer a mother; those who defined her as a mother are dead. Her eventually questionable titular identity has an absurdist ring to it, as do Courage's repetitive, echoed actions with little variation, which beyond her survival in sheer misery are practically futile and devoid of any meaningful human relation. On the other hand, however, that which defines her identity as a woman surviving war by way of a cruel business is present to the very end, in an ambiguous disturbing ending with which Brecht intends to trigger his audience's serious reflection. Courage's refusal of a conventional reaction to death first strikes the spectator as de-familiarizing, but upon closer examination, Weigel's theatrical solution of the mute scream, for example, or Brecht's decision to have Courage tend to Kattrin's corpse the way she does, really opened up a new space for "de-familiarizing" de-familiarization itself. The mute scream is directed to the audience and turns away from the sergeant; importantly, it resembles a skull and as such foreshadows further death and disaster. And the four creatures in *FP* are practically shown in death in progress — a death that beyond Nell's case does not explicitly occur, but whose ghostly presence can no longer be masked, nor can the characters' mournfulness throughout *FP*.

Brecht's de-familiarization does not apply to Beckett, in that the Beckett of *FP* seems rather uninterested in soliciting political thought or action. It does apply to Beckett, however, since his characters counter pain, death, and alienation by a specifically Beckettian form of de-familiarization, thus rendering their existence bearable in their own way of tragicomic distancing. What Beckett's and Brecht's depictions share in the face of these massive human challenges, is the insistence of their plays on some form of onwardness.

A comparison of the omnipresence of corpses and the related grave actions that permeate *MC* and *FP* is not as absurd as that of a "banana" with a "rhinoceros", a "recording tape" with a "palm tree", or, alternatively, of an "egg-shell" with an "urn", to recall the suggestive provocation, quoted earlier, which Werner Hecht deployed in order to launch his comparison of Brecht and Beckett. It is hardly a coincidence that Adorno in his essay (literally so, as "Versuch") on *FP* mentions Brecht more than once in the context of terror and alleged subjective differences, writing the following:

Der Simplifikateur des Schreckens [Beckett] weigert sich, anders als Brecht, der Simplifikation. Er ist ihm aber gar nicht so unähnlich, insofern, als seine Differenziertheit zur Empfindlichkeit gegen

²⁹ Cf. Salman Akhtar, "Some Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Concept of Dignity," Presentation at the Panel Discussion *Dignity* at the National Meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in New York, January 18, 2014.

subjektive Differenzen wird, die zur conspicuous consumption derer verkamen, welche Individuation sich leisten können. Daran ist ein sozial Wahres. (Adorno 197-198).

The simplifier of terror [Beckett] refuses - unlike Brecht - any simplification. But he is not so dissimilar from Brecht, insofar as his differentiation becomes sensitivity to subjective differences, which have regressed to the "conspicuous consumption" of those who can afford individuation. Therein lies social truth. (Adorno/Jones 125)

MC's and FP's characters cannot afford individuation. Marked by universal affliction and massive attrition, their lives and actions are devoid of relation and point to the grave.

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FEDERICO BELLINI

**“DER MENCH [SIC] IST EIN
GEWOHNHEITSTIER”:**

Beckett and Habit

As is well known, the concept of habit, together with that of time and memory, plays a pivotal role in Beckett's early essay *Proust*. Beckett defines habit as “a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lighting-conductor of his existence.” (Beckett 2006, IV, 515-16). As such, habit is a necessary evil, the blindness in face of the violence of life without which life itself would be unbearable. Nonetheless, no habit can hold forever, and when it is broken, because of some external change, the subject is exposed to the world as it really is, and the periods preceding the construction of new habits “represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being.” (Beckett 2006, IV, 516). The potential fertility of this suffering lies in the fact that it is then that the psychological mechanism leading to involuntary memory can be more easily triggered. Identity itself, Beckett claims, is simply a form of habit, nothing but a convention: “we are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.” (Beckett 2006, IV, 517).

This bleak view of habit plays a central role in many of Beckett's works. In *Krapp's Last Tape* the protagonist is trapped in a cage of habits – drinking, eating bananas, listening to and recording tapes – physically represented by the piles of spools and boxes on his desk. The routine helps him go through his days but at the same time makes him forget the revelation he had in his youth, a revelation that inspired him. Krapp thus becomes more and more similar to his tape recorder, repeating over and over again the same things without actually living them. In *Happy Days*, Winnie is another clear representation of the deadening effects of habit and routine, which gradually diminish the freedom and strength of the subject, while at the same time hiding it from the realization of the passing of time (See Collins 1974). In *Endgame*, habit is the law of the sadomasochistic relationship between Hamm and Clov,

exchanging “all life long always the same questions, the same answers”. In the short story *Dante and the Lobster*, habitual behaviour – in particular the preparation of the Gorgonzola cheese sandwich – seems to be the only centripetal force in an otherwise radically centrifugal character.

These aspects of Beckett's conceptualization of habit are often related to the author's interest in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, as the second reality created by habit corresponds to the Veil of Maya that hides the truth of life but that at the same time makes life possible. Nonetheless, besides this negative view, Beckett often seems to offer a more nuanced representation of habit. For instance, in the novel *Murphy*, habit plays an ambiguous role. On the one hand, as the mere and meaningless repetition of something, it is negative; in this sense, the sun is a creature of habit that shines “having no alternative, on the nothing new” (Beckett 2006, I, 1), and work is an institutionalized routine from which the protagonist flees because he is afraid it may limit his freedom and eventually be the end of him. On the other hand, the protagonist's way of using the rocking chair represents a different and more positive form of habit. The chair is almost a part of his own person – or, as Beckett would have it in *Proust*, an “organic eccentricity” of his body – and its mechanical pendulum-like movement that does not take anywhere represents the repetitiveness of habit to its extreme. However, it does not limit Murphy's freedom, and he does not shun it. On the contrary, rocking himself is the means thanks to which the protagonist can access his inner being and be free in a more radical way.

The rock got faster and faster, shorter and shorter [...] soon his body would be quiet. Most things under the moon got slower and slower and then stopped, a rock got faster and faster and then stopped. Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free. (Beckett 2006, I, 253)

Murphy achieves a state of withdrawal from the world which was already experienced by Belacqua in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. In that case, though, the protagonist was not free to access this dimension at his own will, but he had to wait passively for it to come to him. “The will and nill cannot suicide, they are not free to suicide. [...] He remembers the pleasant gracious bountiful tunnel, and cannot get back.” (Beckett 1992, 123) This idea corresponds to the claim expressed in *Proust*, according to which the subject, in order to access revelation has to give up his will, but this of course cannot be done voluntarily, as it can only happen by surprise. On the contrary, Murphy has found a way to make his will commit suicide, and this happens precisely thanks to habit. By letting habit win over while riding his rocking chair, Murphy's will can be paradoxically switched off at will, fading away in the radical mechanization of its motion.

Such more positive aspect of habit becomes very important in many of Beckett's mature works. Habit is here understood not only as the veil that hides reality from the subject's sight, but also as the sum of the peculiar aspects of the subject himself, that is,

the mark of his identity. Moreover, habit is not always seen as merely passive, but also as an active and productive force. In *Watt*, for instance, not only is daily life in the house of Mr Knott regulated according to rigid schedules, but the characters themselves are almost only represented through their habits as distinctive traits. Also, the hypertrophic use of the combinatorial logic in the novel seems to emulate the mechanic and repetitive aspects of habit, thus showing how passive iteration can be a legitimate way of making a story proceed even when faith in words is lost and nothing seems to be left to say¹.

Habit is thus both a positive and a negative element in many of Beckett's works, an ambiguity which can be productively questioned. In order to do so it could be useful – in addition to the reference to Schopenhauer – to relate Beckett's discourse on habit to the broader context of the coeval debate on this theme. When Beckett was writing, habit was an important theme for reflection among thinkers and philosophers within a significant tradition².

Here, I will consider Beckett's idea of habit in relation to this tradition, focusing in particular on the theories of Maine de Biran and Félix Ravaisson, because of their historical importance and potential similarities with Beckett's discourse. Beckett might have come into contact with these ideas both directly, being such an omnivorous reader, and indirectly, as these themes were widely circulating at the time³. However, my goal is not to prove an influence, but to consider some similarities which could shed further light on certain aspects of Beckett's own discourse.

The philosophical reflection on habit can be traced at least as far back as Aristotle, who in the *Rhetoric* affirmed that “habit is similar to nature: nature is what one always does, habit is what one does often.” (*Rhet.*, I, x, 1369b, 1370a) The apparently small shift between the “always” and the “often” justifies the attention given to habit, as it is the reason for the paradoxical status of this apparently unproblematic concept: habit is similar to nature, in other words it is that which in human beings is closer to natural laws, but at the same time it does not totally coincide with them and it is highly idiosyncratic; it can pertain only to a conscious subjectivity, but it also makes consciousness dull by diminishing the level of its attention; it enables the performance

¹ This is not to assimilate combinatorial logic to habit *tout court*, as its meaning can vary significantly according to different contexts. For example, it can be claimed that in *Murphy* the combinatorial game the protagonist plays with the biscuits, shuffling them in order to make sure he eats them in a random way, is done in order to *counteract* habit as expressed by preference (thanks to Ann Banfield for stimulating conversation on this point).

² About the disappearance of the theme of habit from the philosophical debate in the early 30s – with important exceptions, such as Paul Ricoeur and Maurice Merleau-Ponty – see Kaufmann 2001, where the author refers to two reasons: the affirmation of Darwinism against Lamarckism on the one hand, and of behavioral theories in psychology on the other.

³ Beckett's interest for the theme of habit is also proven by the extensive quotation from Geulinx's scholastic discussion on “habitus seu habitas” in Ms 10971/6 (10) at Reading.

of complicated actions, while at the same time making the powers of perception less sharp; it has the power of making the human being both stronger by means of training, and puppet-like through the alienating effects of routine.

However, if habit was already a theme of reflection in ancient Greece, it is in the early XIX century that it becomes the object of a very lively philosophical debate, especially in France. The entry *Habitude* in the *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle* puts it quite bluntly, claiming that only then did habit emerge as a “nouvel enjeu philosophique.” This 'new philosophical challenge' can be said to have been started in 1799, when the *Classe des sciences morales et politiques de l'Institut National* offered a prize for a philosophical essay on the role of habit in thought. The contest was won by Maine de Biran and his ground-breaking essay was published in 1803 under the title *Influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser*. Maine de Biran's seminal contribution can be summarized in two basic points: the first is the fundamental role played by habit in the distinction between the two Cartesian realms of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Habit is, in the case of the latter, a screen that divides the subject from the object but that can be abolished by the philosophical gaze: one can be used to thinking that the Earth is flat but be ready to change opinion if faced with good reasons to do so. In relation to the mind, instead, habit belongs to the dynamic of the subject itself and consequently cannot be eradicated:

Dès que le grand homme qui sait *s'étonner* le premier, porte ses regards hors de lui, le voile de l'habitude tombe, il se trouve en présence de la nature, l'interroge librement, et recueille ses réponses; mais s'il veut concentrer sa vue sur lui-même, il demeure toujours en présence de l'habitude, qui continue à voiler la composition et le nombre de ses produits, comme elle dérobaient auparavant jusqu'à leur existence. (Maine de Biran 1954, 7)⁴

Habit is not only an effect of the interaction of the subject with the material environment, but it is also part of the structure of the subject itself. As a consequence, habit has to be deleted in order to gain knowledge of the outside world, but it is the point of departure of the subject's process of self-discovery, in a somewhat similar way to Descartes' doubt⁵. The previously neglected theme of habit suddenly takes on the role of fulcrum of the analysis of the self.

⁴ “As soon as the great man who *wonders* observes the world around him, the veil of habit is lifted and he finds himself in the presence of nature, and thus he questions it freely and gathers its answers; but if he wants to focus his attention on himself, he remains within the presence of habit, which continues to veil the composition and the number of its products, as it was previously depriving them of their own existence.”

⁵ “L'habitude n'est pas seulement mieux connue: elle devient un moyen de connaissance. En effet, si la distinction des facultés explique la disparité des effets de l'habitude, en retour celle-ci permet de remonter aux facultés d'origine.” (Janicaud 1997, 21) (“Habit is not only better known: it becomes a

Maine de Biran's second contribution is his distinction between *active habit* and *passive habit*. The latter has to do with the progressive dulling of sensations due to their persistent stimulation; the former with the gradual improvement of the action through repetition. Maine de Biran plays his concept of *active habit* against Locke's idea of the subject as a *tabula rasa*, that is, as the empty stage of the impressions. By doing this, he was looking for an active and original force that could overcome the restrictive limits of Locke's empiricism and safeguard the creativity and freedom of the human being⁶. Maine De Biran later expanded on this topic, making of the distinction between activity and passivity the basis of his metaphysical system in his essay *La décomposition de la pensée*.

If Maine De Biran's seminal study polarized the attention on the theme of habit, it was Félix Ravaisson, one of his pupils, who popularized his thesis – even though with significant changes – and who, accordingly, was more influential on successive thinkers. Ravaisson, the *enfant prodige* of French philosophy, published his doctoral dissertation titled *De l'habitude* in 1838, when he was only 25.⁷ Even though it is probably unfair to claim that “c'est Ravaisson qui y désigne le cœur, non peut-être du biranisme, mais de la fécondité du biranisme”⁸ (Blondel 1999, 17) it is true that his philosophical research was highly influenced by Maine de Biran and that it could hardly be understood without reference to the older philosopher⁹.

means of knowledge. In fact, if on the one hand the difference between the faculties explains the variety of the effects of habit, on the other such a variety of effects allows us to return to the original faculties”).

⁶ From the philosopher's point of view, if this active force were negated, life would be reduced solely to its participation to the inert and identity-less matter “L'être réduit à des organes passifs immobiles ne dirigerait les mouvements, serait borné aux facultés *instinctives*, il n'y aurait point en lui de *personnalité* distincte; par l'odorat seul, par exemple, son existence serait peut-être comparable, à celle de l'huître ou du polype, bien loin qu'il fut capable de former des *combinaisons*, des *abstractions*, etc.” (Maine de Biran 1954, 196) (“The being reduced to static, passive organs would not direct its movements, it would be limited to *instinctive* faculties, and there would be no distinct personality in it; by relying solely on the sense of smell, for example, its existence would possibly be comparable to that of an oyster or a polyp, and it would be far from being able to construct *combinations*, *abstractions*, etc.”). For a reading of De Biran as anticipator of phenomenology against empiricism and rationalism see Merleau-Ponty 1997, in which the author claims that “anticipant la phénoménologie, Biran semble s'y orienter vers une philosophie indifférente à la distinction de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur” (56) (“anticipating phenomenology, Biran seems to move towards a philosophy that is indifferent to the distinction between the interior and the exterior”).

⁷ See Bergson 1993 and Janicaud 1997.

⁸ “It was Ravaisson who expressed the core, maybe not of Biranism, but of the fecundity of Biranism.”

⁹ In the difference between Maine de Biran's and Ravaisson's discourses one can also perceive the shift from Enlightenment thought to Romantic Idealism, as Ravaisson refuses from the start to limit the analysis to the empirical realm as Maine de Biran claims to do. “Maine de Biran s'en tient au *comment*; Ravaisson remonte au *pourquoi*; il ne se contente pas de constater la 'loi apparente' de l'habitude, mais il

Like Maine de Biran before him, Ravaisson also grounds his discourse on a fundamental dichotomy, but in his case it is not the one between the two Cartesian substances, but between the inorganic and the organic world: the former is intended as the domain of necessity, the latter as the domain of freedom. These two territories are distinguished by the different way in which “la loi universelle, le caractère fondamental de l'être, [ce qui] est la tendance à persister dans sa manière d'être”¹⁰ (Ravaisson 1927, 17) is realized in each of them. In the inorganic realm, the general law of being is expressed by inertia, while in the organic realm it is expressed by habit. As a consequence, in the inorganic realm, beings are defined only by the reciprocal place they occupy in space while, on the contrary, it is through time that living creatures develop their identity. “Cette unité hétérogène dans l'espace – claims Ravaisson – c'est l'Organization. Cette unité successive dans le temps, c'est la Vie.”¹¹ (Ravaisson 1927, 6)

Habit and inertia are thus distinguished, but only as two faces of the same coin, complementary expressions of the same metaphysical postulate. Against Descartes and Maine de Biran, their complementarity expresses the fundamental unity of the substance of Being¹². This unity is articulated in the perpetual shifting of the border between the organic and the inorganic, the border constituted by the friction between habit and inertia, which are the same thing seen from different perspectives. As a consequence

s'efforce d'en apprendre le *comment et le pourquoi*, d'en pénétrer la génération, et d'en comprendre la cause” (Janicaud 1997, 16) (“Maine de Biran sticks to the 'how'; Ravaisson, instead, goes back to the 'why': he is not content with recording the “apparent law” of habit, but he strives to find the 'how and why', to penetrate its generation, and to understand its causes”). See also Catherine Malabou, “Addiction and Grace.” Introduction to Ravaisson, Félix. 2008. *Of Habit*. Continuum: London.

¹⁰ “The universal law, the fundamental character of being is its tendency to persist in its way of being.”

¹¹ “Such heterogeneous unity in space is Organization. Such successive unity through time, is Life.”

¹² “Biran met l'accent sur la dualité que l'habitude révèle; l'effort n'est pas soumis à l'habitude en tant qu'il est *compos et conscius sui*; il y a dans l'homme quelque chose qui est au-dessus de la nature et d'essence différente. Ravaisson est au contraire préoccupé d'établir des analogies assurant une certaine continuité entre les divers étages de l'univers.” (Blondel 1999, 16-17). (“Biran highlights the duality revealed by habit; the effort is not subject to habit as long as it is *compos et conscius sui*; there is something in the human being which is beyond nature and of a different essence. Ravaisson, on the contrary, wants to establish analogies which guarantee a certain continuity among the various stages of the universe.”)

l'habitude est la commune limite, ou le terme moyen entre la volonté et la nature; et c'est un moyen terme mobile, une limite qui se déplace sans cesse, et qui avance par un progrès insensible d'une extrémité à l'autre. (Ravaisson 1927, 40)¹³

Habit is thus the in-between of activity and passivity, the border between the subject and the object that at the same time divides and unites them. It is like a wave on the surf, as it pushes subjectivity inside nature, and then it withdraws as nature absorbs its energy. If, following Aristotle,¹⁴ Ravaisson says that habit is a second nature because it makes human actions almost similar to nature (Ravaisson 1927, 43-44), it is also true that it is a “second will”, a form of parasitism of the will that absorbs nature and thus expands its territory. Linking nature and will, habit is at the same time an expansion and a contraction of freedom, a form of both resistance and acceptance of destiny:

La progression continue des puissances successives d'un seul et même principe, qui s'enveloppent les unes les autres dans la hiérarchie des formes de la vie, qui se développent en sens inverse dans le progrès de l'habitude. La limite inférieure est la nécessité, le Destin, si l'on veut, mais dans la spontanéité de la Nature; le limite supérieure, la Liberté de l'entendement. L'habitude descend de l'une à l'autre; elle rapproche ces contraires, et, en les rapprochant, elle en dévoile l'essence intime et la nécessaire connexion. [...] L'histoire de l'habitude représente le retour de la Liberté à la Nature, ou plutôt l'invasion du domaine de la liberté par la spontanéité naturelle. (Ravaisson 1927, 54)¹⁵

The line of reflection on habit started by Maine de Biran and carried on by Ravaisson was further continued by Henri Bergson, who was a student of Ravaisson and, in 1900, succeeded to him at the Académie de sciences morales et politiques. However, faced with different philosophical challenges, Bergson's concept of habit radically changed, recovering in part, even though in a different way, the dualism that had characterized De Biran's worldview. Bergson considers habit as pure mechanism, as the colonization of the area of the *élan vital* by inert matter. Habit is the gradual death of the spirit in its penetration into matter, and matter itself is nothing else but crystallized habit, the deposit of habit in time. Bergson thus consciously ignores Maine

¹³ "Habit is the common limit, or the middle term, between will and nature; and it is a moving middle term, a limit that shifts unceasingly and moves forward in a unperceptible progress from one extremity to the other."

¹⁴ See Kaufmann 2001, 418.

¹⁵ "The continuous progression of the successive powers of one and the same principle, powers enveloping one another in the hierarchy of the forms of life, powers which develop in the opposite directions of the forms of life. The lower limit is necessity – Destiny, as might be said, but in the spontaneity of Nature; the higher limit is the Freedom of the understanding. Habit descends from the one to the other; it brings these contraries together, and in doing so reveals their intimate essence and their necessary connection. [...] The history of habit then represents the return of Freedom to Nature, or rather the invasion of the domain of freedom by natural spontaneity."

de Biran's concept of active habit, and even more Ravaisson's claim that habit is not only, as scholar Dominique Janicaud puts it, “fossilisation du spirituel, [but also] spiritualization de l'inerte” (Janicaud 1997, 43)¹⁶.

Dans le schéma bergsonien, l'habitude n'est pas médiatisante: dans la dichotomie matière/vie, elle est du côté de la matière; elle constitue le tribut qui nous payons à notre corporéité. [...] Bergson n'a pas discerné le côté positif de l'habitude de Ravaisson. Pour lui l'habitude se comprend essentiellement à partir du mécanisme. (Janicaud 1997, 42)¹⁷

In the context of Bergsonian philosophy the idea of habit as a mere mechanism is used in the context of the famous discrimination of “the two forms of memory” in *Matière et mémoire*. This is the distinction between, on the one hand, memory of the past as stored in virtual images and, on the other, memory as habit, as the bodily disposition to mechanically reproduce an action. The former is memory as the experience of *durée* projected toward the past, as the record of becoming that leaves “à chaque fait, à chaque geste, sa place et sa date” the latter is habit as the corporeal sedimentation of experience, which is “assise dans le présent et ne regardant que l'avenir” (Bergson 2008, 86)¹⁸, not referring explicitly to anything outside of it. Accordingly, in Bergson's thought, the role of habit is unambiguously negative: it stands for the passive element of resistance opposing the creative flux of the *durée*:

[Habit] stands opposed to the self as a free creative activity and represents a perpetual threat to its autonomy; the automatic is always ready to encroach upon the living and immediately to occupy any ground lost by it. There is an ethical quality in Bergson's thought on this, since it becomes an imperative to retain as great a degree of consciousness and freedom of action as possible, and to yield as little ground as possible to the surreptitious advent of merely habitual modes of behaviour. (Pilkington 1976, 164-5)

As is well known, Bergson's ideas were one of Proust's main influences. For Proust as for Bergson, habit is conceptualized as a thickening, a callosity on the surface of identity, that protects the subject from the outside world by gradually absorbing its surroundings and transforming them into a tough shield, but which has to be overcome in order to get to know reality as it is. The main difference between the two is that, while for Bergson there was no way to get free from habit if not by the constant exercise

¹⁶ “fossilization of the spiritual, [but also] spiritualisation of the inert.”

¹⁷ “Within the Bergsonian framework, habit is not a mediator; within the dichotomy life/matter, it is on the side of matter; it constitutes the tribute we pay to our physicality. [...] Bergson has not discerned the positive side of Ravaisson's theory of habit. According to him, habit is to be understood as essentially starting from its mechanism.”

¹⁸ “To each fact, to each gesture, its place and time [...] settled within the present and focussed on the future”.

of attention, in Proust's thought involuntary memory makes it possible. Moreover, Proust pays more credit to the positive aspect of habit as a protective screen, without which life is painful, as proved by the following quotation.

Jusqu'ici je l'avais considérée [l'habitude] surtout comme un pouvoir annihilateur qui supprime l'originalité et jusqu'à la conscience des perceptions; maintenant je la voyais comme une divinité redoutable, si rivée à nous, son visage insignifiant si incrusté dans notre coeur, que si elle se détache, si elle se détourne de nous, cette déité que nous ne distinguons pas, nous inflige des souffrances plus terribles qu'aucune et qu'alors elle est aussi cruelle que la mort. (Proust 1988, III, 420)¹⁹

Beckett's rendering of Proust's theory of habit in his essay on the *Recherche* is faithful to Bergson's reductive view, but further simplified and radicalised in its tones. As already noted, however, Beckett's actual representation of habit in his works is not always consistent with that theory, and it is often more nuanced or ambiguous, thus showing how the author was probably aware of the complexity of the topic and of the multiplicity of issues that were at stake and that were still debated at the time. Ulrika Maude has already shown in a recent essay (Maude 2011) how Beckett's treatment of the theme of habit seems to point towards a more positive and less reductive view than Proust's, showing significant similarities to Ravaisson's theories. In these cases, habit is not the deadening power that limits freedom, truth, and life, but the point of articulation of the relation between the inside and the outside, between passivity and activity, between the organic and the inorganic. Beckett seems to reject Bergson's views and adopt or reinvent 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. Habit is a mechanism, but it is also freedom insofar as it frees the mind from tending to the more menial actions. This is exactly what happens to Murphy: in binding himself to his rocking chair, he makes his will totally adhere to his habit, to the mechanical side of his body, and he thus escapes the cage of lower, or merely passive, habits. Utter passivity reverts itself into absolute freedom thanks to the overcoming of the distinction between passivity and activity in habit. As Ravaisson has it, habit becomes a “spontanéité passive et active tout à la fois, et également différente de la Fatalité mécanique, et de la Liberté réflexive” (Ravaisson 1927, 36).²⁰ Habit represents exactly the point in which the will vanishes but, at the same time, it serves as *principium individuationis*, as it holds the subject together.

¹⁹ “Hitherto I had regarded [habit] chiefly as the annihilating force which suppresses the originality and even the awareness of one's perception; now I saw it as a dread deity, so riveted to one's being, its insignificant face so incrustated in one's heart, that if it detaches itself, if it turns away from one, this deity that one had barely distinguished inflicts on one sufferings more terrible than any other and is then as cruel as death itself.” (trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff)

²⁰ “A spontaneity that is at once passive and active, and equally different from mechanical Fatality and reflexive Freedom.”

Murphy's inner world is not the passive dimension of a dark *noluntas*, but the flux of forms of freedom, in which the distinctions between the realms of spirit and matter are abolished.

In this sense, Beckett's intuition of habit as it is presented by the rocking chair proves even closer to Ravaisson and Maine de Biran. Habit is the necessary starting point of the process of discovery of oneself as it gives the opportunity to analyse the relationship between the active and the passive sides that constitute the subject. Beckett's works are full of characters trapped inside habits, ticks, forced into repetitive patterns, reduced to puppets. But Beckett does not focus on habit only to show its existentially negative effects, as a moralist would do. On the contrary, he uses habit as a probe to investigate the essence of the human being, by taking it to its extreme limits.

All Strange Away can serve as a good example. In this case we are faced with a character thrown into a space that becomes gradually smaller and smaller. In each stage of the shrinking of the room the character develops all the habits that the space allows him to perform. At the beginning there is room enough for a certain freedom of movement, and he spends his time “sitting, standing, walking, kneeling, crawling, lying, creeping, all any length.” (Beckett 2006, IV, 250). When the room gets smaller “three foot square, five high” he only has enough space to revolve and observe the four pornographic images hanging on the walls. These pictures excite his onanistic fantasy, until the possibilities of the ‘box’ are again exhausted, and the author reduces its dimension again, forcing the character to discover a new way of using it.

Enclosed in such a small volume – a three-foot cube – no possibility is left for movement, and the character lies in the utmost passivity. As such, he begins hearing a voice, probably his own, talking about religion, love, and philosophers “suggesting pursuit of knowledge.” In the prosecution of the story, as the same structure is repeated again and again, the character is gradually stuck inside a claustrophobic container similar to a uterus surrounding a huddling foetus, where he is left with only vague memories and a sort of primitive fear and indistinct desire.

An increasingly radical passivity is thus forced upon the character, who always reacts by trying to make the best – or the worst – of the allotted space by producing new habits. The confrontation between the forced passivity and the active will of the character is thus articulated on habit, which conveys the active element of the character, and it organizes it, so as to exhaust – in the Deleuzian sense – all the possibilities offered by the room. As in *Murphy*, habit is thus almost a form of resistance against the progressive decrease of freedom. This process is not only represented as a bleak masochistic literary play, but it also serves Beckett's attempt to investigate the essence of the human being. At the end of *All Strange Away* the character is described as

hinged and crooked as only the human man or woman living or not when light at full without all this poking and prying about for cracks holes and appendages. (Beckett 2006, IV, 355)

In habit, Beckett seems to say, we are at the same time less and more than ourselves. Less, because we lose control on our actions and on our will. More, because we become one and the same with the world around us. "Der mensch [sic] ist ein Gewohnheitstier", "The human being is a creature of habit" as the narrator of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* claims, is thus not a reductive definition, but a way of looking for the human being between the shifting planes of its two dimensions, where a fragile subjectivity takes place. Such an idea of the subject recalls Ravaissou's conceptualization of habit as the in-between of activity and passivity which chimes in the following intense passage from *The Unnamable*:

an inside, and an outside, and me in the middle, perhaps, that is what I am, that thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be thin as foil, I am neither one side nor the other, I am in the middle, I'm the partition, I have two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that is what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either. (Beckett 1966, 386)

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ANDREA GUIDUCCI

VERS UNE PRÉSENCE TANGENTIELLE*Impromptu d'Ohio*

*Si le but de toute activité littéraire est une conciliation
entre des tendances apparemment irréconciliables,
n'y a-t-il pas plus de chance qu'elles se trouvent conciliées
chez le critique que chez le créateur ?
(Georges Poulet)*

Introduction

L'œuvre de Beckett assume la question de l'écart dans toutes ses déclinaisons. Problème philosophique d'abord, indépendant de l'expérience d'écriture, il se manifestera dans les textes de manière évidente et imposante: jusqu'à en devenir une question intrinsèque. On en trouvera des représentations dans les intrigues des premières œuvres, il parviendra ensuite à être pris en charge par la rhétorique. Comme on le sait, un empêchement d'abord, il deviendra une ressource pour l'écriture. On ne présentera pas ici toutes les valeurs que le terme peut revêtir pour la critique ; il suffit d'annoncer qu'il sera pour nous l'espace de non-coïncidence, de distance, d'absence. L'écriture de Beckett est en équilibre entre l'acceptation de l'écart et le combat contre la séparation et l'inachèvement qu'il amène dans l'œuvre; en équilibre entre le recours à celui-ci comme ressource créatrice et la démythification de ces mêmes procédés. Elle est prise dans un flux qui la mène de tentative en leurre et de leurre en désaveu, toujours dans l'espoir de combler l'écart et d'assister au jaillissement d'une présence.

La présence est pour nous l'opposé de l'écart: ce que l'écriture de Beckett aurait toujours poursuivi, soit, une effectivité de l'écriture en tant que telle, définitivement dégagee de tout objet prétendu, de tout leurre de représentation réaliste, de tout vœu de communication ou expression; non plus médium, non plus reléguée dans l'espace de l'entre-deux dont la critique a aussi souvent parlé; bref, une écriture présente. On propose de lire *Impromptu d'Ohio* comme un parcours d'approche vers une présence dont l'avènement ne pourra durer qu'un instant avant de s'enfoncer à nouveau dans l'espace de l'écart. De là l'adjectif tangentielle.

Les implications qui lient Beckett à deux des auteurs majeurs du modernisme, Joyce et Proust, sont bien connues: «Je jure de me défaire de J. J. avant de mourir.» écrit-il ; également, son approche à la *Recherche* va bien au delà du commentaire dans l'essai *Proust* : le questionnement serré et l'indépendance de la réflexion dont Beckett fait preuve, révèlent une volonté forte de frayer des chemins ultérieurs ou alternatifs.

Néanmoins, les partages de l'histoire littéraire ne peuvent pas se définir par simple dépassement, s'il en était le cas ici, ou continuité. Il faudrait sans doute faire référence aux poétiques mais, face au postmodernisme, les embarras des théoriciens sont connus ; même dans son rapport au modernisme, une question de base tel que: « Does postmodernism provide a breach with the past or is it merely a continuation of the more extreme aspects of modernism ? »¹ est encore ouverte.

D'autre part, la tentation d'inscrire *IO* dans l'horizon postmoderne semble légitime: d'abord en raison de l'année de rédaction de la pièce, ensuite pour certains de ses caractères structurels. Brian McHale met en évidence cinq procédés typiques de la prose postmoderniste² et il sera évident déjà à une première lecture de la pièce qu'ils sont, de manière plus ou moins originelle, tous employés : « infinite regress », trompe l'œil, « strange loops or metalepsis », « characters in search of an author », « abysmal fictions ». D'ailleurs, McHale situait déjà dans la *trilogie* le tournant postmoderniste³ de l'écriture de Beckett en raison d'une opposition assez répandue parmi les historiens de la littérature entre modernisme et postmodernisme: « epistemological dominant » pour l'un, « ontological dominant » pour l'autre. Et *l'on craint* que notre concept de présence ne soit mésinterprété et qu'il n'induisse à lire *IO* sous le jour d'un « foregrounding of ontological concerns »⁴, ni comme une tentative de déborder le cadre de la fiction en faveur d'une « réalité » prétendue. Loin de là.

D'autres réflexions aussi supporteraient l'hypothèse qui voudrait situer Beckett ou *IO* dans le domaine postmoderniste : le silence qui hante certaines expériences littéraires et qui mène vers une *Literature of exhaustion*⁵, ou *Vers une littérature de l'épuisement*⁶, ou encore vers *L'adieu à la littérature*⁷, avait déjà été rangé sous le drapeau du postmodernisme – « I write about certain authors who give themselves to silence »⁸ avait dit Hassan. Ces remarques devraient suffire pour encadrer la question et pour qu'au fil de nos réflexions sur ce texte le rapport à ce thème, qui est en effet bien plus

¹ Douwe W Fokkema. 1984. *Literary History, Modernism and Postmodernism*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 37.

² Brian McHale. 2001. *Postmodernist fiction*. London : Routledge.

³ « Beckett marks the transition from modernist to postmodernist poetics in the course of his trilogy of novels. ». *Ibid.* 12.

⁴ *Id.* 27.

⁵ John Starck. 1974. *The Literature of Exhaustion : Borges, Nabokov, and Barth*, Durham : Duke U. P.

⁶ Dominique Rabaté. 2004. *Vers une littérature de l'épuisement*, Paris : José Corti.

⁷ William Marx. 2005. *L'adieu à la littérature : histoire d'une dévalorisation, XVIIIe-XXe siècle*. Paris : Minuit.

⁸ Ihab Habib Hassan. 1971. *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, New York : Oxford U. P.

problématique, soit clair dans la visée d'une ultérieure argumentation dans la conclusion de cet article.

Des mouvements déchirants

On a souhaité mettre en évidence dès le titre l'importance du mouvement dans la pièce, en nous éloignant de certaines lectures de l'œuvre de Beckett qui établiraient une opposition nette entre l'écriture statique du théâtre et celle dynamique des récits et des romans⁹. Remarques appropriées si l'on s'en tient aux intrigues et aux déplacements scéniques des acteurs. Dans *IO* aussi, l'action est apparemment réduite au minimum: deux personnages, dont l'un lit un livre à l'autre qui l'écoute: dans ce récit un personnage abandonne quelqu'un auquel il était lié et commence à recevoir des visites de la part d'un autre personnage qui lit une histoire pour lui. Néanmoins, par un changement de perspective, on pourrait aussi bien affirmer que toute expérience d'écriture – et l'on sait combien les œuvres de Beckett, sans exclusions, prennent à proprement parler en charge cette expérience – n'est pas exempte de mouvements intrinsèques. Écrire est un « mouvement d'ouverture violente, fraying douloureux »¹⁰. Notamment dans *IO* c'est le livre sur le plateau qui met en scène l'écriture et qui cause les mouvements qui creusent des écarts d'où, sans doute, une présence pourra jaillir.

Dans cette pièce, le mouvement se présente sous forme d'un glissement caché et discret qui vient parcourir, et donc ouvrir par le fait même qu'il les met en évidence, des décalages entre les différents espaces textuels et qui vise, selon notre hypothèse, à tracer un parcours parmi les écarts, vers la présence. Le récit du livre n'est pas un espace en abyme conventionnel, car il déborde, excède l'espace que la composante mimétique¹¹ lui accorde; il ne se borne non plus à renvoyer une image spéculaire de l'autre espace, le plateau; il n'est pas un deuxième niveau diégétique à proprement parler, car ce n'est pas un rapport hiérarchique qui le lie au plateau. La métalepse¹² entre les personnages du récit et les personnages qui sont sur le plateau ne peut pas être envisagée tout simplement comme une substitution ou un renvoi: elle est parcourue par une tension

⁹ Ludovic Janvier, lors d'une interview, sentence de l'écriture théâtrale : « C'est une stase ». Cf. 1990. « Roman/théâtre », *Revue d'esthétique*, 45-54. Cf. aussi Simon, Alfred. « Du théâtre de l'écriture à l'écriture de la scène » *Revue d'esthétique*, Cit. 71-83.

¹⁰ Dominique Rabaté. *Op. Cit.* 144.

¹¹ Mimésis est à entendre ici dans son opposition à diégèse; il faut les considérer comme deux composantes de *IO* plutôt que comme modalité du récit: le plateau et l'action qui s'y déroule d'une part, espace narratif de la lecture du livre de l'autre.

¹² Pour ce qui concerne la métalepse cf. Gérard Genette, 2004. *Métalepse*. Paris : Seuil. Et Pier, John et Schaeffer, Jean-Marie. 2005. *Métalepses. Entorses au pacte de la représentation*. Paris : édition de l'EHESS.

qui approche les deux pôles du décalage sur lesquels elle s'articule. Et ce mouvement est évidemment en relation avec les espacements temporels qui font l'objet du récit, les différentes étapes de la vie du personnage dont il est question et leur tension vers le temps de la mimésis théâtrale. Finalement, on voit que les mouvements circonscrivent des espaces sans toutefois les renfermer. Ils mettent en évidence des écarts dans une intrigue apparemment claire, sans tensions ni ruptures. Apparences qui ont induit Ludovic Janvier à affirmer que « Dans les romans l'ouverture demeure, au théâtre tout cela est clos »¹³.

L'occurrence de l'idée de clôture est ici ambiguë: d'une part, selon notre analyse, la mise en abyme et la théâtralisation ne font qu'ouvrir des espaces d'indétermination par effet de la désarticulation d'un unique espace représenté lorsqu'il se trouve face à un autre – ce faisant, elles nous obligent à nous pencher sur les rapports qui déterminent les mouvements; d'autre part, il faut remarquer avec Éric Wessler que « la fiction de la pièce réduit au minimum les références externes »¹⁴ grâce aux renvois internes du récit au plateau et vice versa – ce qui enferme le public et le lecteur dans un espace extrêmement clos. Ce sera plutôt l'effet d'ouverture qui va nous intéresser, au détriment de la question des renvois référentiels: enfin, on vise l'identification d'un troisième espace hybride qui se crée par effet des mouvements réciproques des espaces. Mais le rôle du livre est de tout évidence un moteur. Dans un certain sens, la pièce tourne autour du livre, se bâtit sur lui. Du moment où ce sont sa présence et son action la cause des mouvements qui vont nous concerner, il peut même être considéré comme le principe déterminant de tout. Mais, le récit ne se pose ou impose pas comme un système accompli et clos car les bornes de l'écart qu'il creuse et qui devraient demeurer bien nettes entre les différents espaces de représentation s'estompent et s'enfoncent nous conduisant sur un chemin vers ce que l'on a proposé d'appeler une présence tangentielle.

L'ambiguïté entre les effets de clôture et d'ouverture demeure lors d'une lecture plus pertinente: tous les mots prononcés sur le plateau sont des mots lus par le Lecteur – à part sans doute « Oui » (*IO*, 63): il faut donc mettre en évidence l'importance de la fonction *je raconte*¹⁵, ou *je lis* dans ce cas spécifique. Cela implique, d'une part, que le référent de la composante diégétique est intérieur à la pièce (c'est l'histoire des personnages sur le plateau qui fait l'objet du livre), d'autre part qu'un écart incommensurable s'installe entre ces deux espaces. La parole du livre, et donc toute parole de la pièce, ne revêt plus une simple fonction fictionnelle, et le livre n'est pas seulement un espace structurellement inférieur à la représentation. Finalement, la parole assume une place

¹³ Ludovic Janvier. 1990. « Roman et théâtre », 48.

¹⁴ Éric Wessler. 2009. *La littérature face à elle-même. L'écriture spéculaire de Samuel Beckett*. Amsterdam/New York : Rodopi. 155.

¹⁵ Anne Ubersfeld. 1990. « Beckett dit : *je raconte* », *Revue d'esthétique, Op. Cit.* 67-69.

surélevée par rapport à l'univers diégétique qui s'esquisse dans le livre aussi bien que par rapport à la mimésis: cela grâce à la présence de l'objet-livre sur le plateau, et à la conscience du *je lis* que tout énoncé réfléchit. Il en résulte d'une part la mise en relief de l'énonciation et de l'autre un enlèvement et suspension des énoncés. Le discours se partage et la conséquence en est que « L'indécidable introduit par le *je raconte* impose le doute à tous les niveaux»¹⁶.

De surcroît, le sceau du partage du discours n'est pas uniquement présumé et il n'affecte pas que l'espace du plateau. « Il reste peu à dire » (*IO*, 60): le texte du livre également se place sous le signe d'un éloignement imposé par la diction, par le verbe « dire » qui réfléchit cette distanciation de l'énoncé par rapport au premier plan où il se situe, et qui renvoie tout le reste dans un abîme, à cet état de suspension. Ce qui pose problème évidemment: si l'on s'attend à ce que le récit nous reconduise vers l'espace théâtral et qu'à celui-ci se conjoigne, on ne saurait pas envisager de moyen pour dépasser l'obstacle qu'est la soumission d'une prétendue réalité à l'acte d'affabulation ni de moyen pour enjamber la spectacularisation de l'acte de lecture pour parvenir à l'effectivité d'une réalité qui n'en est pas moins sous nos yeux. On se rend compte alors que ce qui est clos chez Beckett est essouffant, n'est qu'une impasse; au contraire, l'écart, en raison du fait qu'il «est, [...], aussi bien le moyen choisi, avec fureur, que la chose à dire»¹⁷, est une ouverture extrêmement puissante du point de vue de la création: continuellement relancée elle permet de frayer des chemins à travers plusieurs niveaux. Il faut concevoir la fonction *je raconte*, et donc la mise en exergue de l'énonciation qu'elle comporte, comme une régression, un éloignement qui conduit vers d'autres niveaux par rapport à la représentation.

Cette condition du discours est soulignée de manière générale par Janvier qui met en évidence la figure dans laquelle elle s'incarne: il affirme que après les premières pièces, « la voix s'est détachée du corps et lui revient sans le toucher, tout en le concernant mais sans venir de lui, et lui permettant une espèce de suspension. »¹⁸ et que « la voix cherche un corps – au lieu de partir de lui –, un corps qu'elle ne trouvera jamais »¹⁹. Avec l'indépendance, plus ou moins effective de la voix, qui coïncide ici avec la parole du livre, il faut aussi bien souligner le renversement diallélique qui ferait du texte le fondement d'un sujet et de l'existence d'un objet, le véritable principe de tout. *IO* est à lire sous ce jour: le passé n'existe qu'inscrit dans le livre, le futur est annoncé, dicté à l'avance par ses mots, le présent des personnages est déterminé, construit au fur et à mesure par l'acte de la lecture. On voit bien que si la présence pourra être atteinte, elle n'est pas à chercher dans ces prétextes que sont les personnages, les histoires, tout

¹⁶ *Id.* 69.

¹⁷ Clément Bruno, 1994. *L'œuvre sans qualité. Rhétorique de Samuel Beckett*. Paris : Seuil, 152, 153.

¹⁸ Ludovic Janvier. 1990. « Roman et théâtre ». 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

ce qui est représentation et par conséquent médiat. Il faut remonter vers le « médium » et essayer d'identifier et définir un espace en deçà de lui.

La traversé du livre I

Le récit s'articule en trois moments. Ces étapes sont: la vie en solitude du personnage, les rencontres nocturnes avec le visiteur et ce qui suit le jour où le visiteur « ne disparut point » (IO, 65). Cependant, le déroulement de ces parties est fort problématique et des fractures se créent à chaque passage d'un moment à l'autre. A part la fracture que chaque changement de situation constituerait en soi, à part la fracture qu'est la séparation à l'origine de la pièce entre le héros du récit et la « chère personne », d'autres fractures, d'autres écarts se creusent par effet d'une disjonction continuellement relancée entre le récit et la représentation – et donc en opposition aux tensions qui visent une conjonction-conciliation. On va les annoncer: l'ombre, à savoir l'alter ego du Lecteur, n'était censée venir consoler le héros du récit, alter ego de l'Entendeur, que si ce dernier ne quittait pas les lieux habités avec la chère personne; le livre, fermé dans le récit, reste ouvert sur le plateau et la lecture continue.

Le Lecteur et l'Entendeur ne sont que deux fonctions déterminées par l'acte de lecture, deux facettes d'une unité partagée par le livre. Leur position physique n'est pas spéculaire²⁰ – ce qui suggère qu'il n'y a pas d'identité entre eux au début de la pièce – et leur rapport n'est non plus de complémentarité. En revanche, approchés par la traversé du livre, ils ébaucheront un mouvement spéculaire²¹ – signale sans doute d'une identité atteinte mais pas d'unité puisqu'il n'y aura pas de contact entre eux, de clôture. En effet, parmi les espacements ouverts par le récit il y aura l'interposition d'une troisième instance qui pourrait accomplir l'unité de ce rapport. Il s'agit du personnage qui n'est pas sur le plateau et qui a une place étrange dans le livre: la personne abandonnée qui apparaît en rêve au héros et dont le visiteur est l'ombre; responsable de tous les mouvements, elle le « dépêche » (IO, 64) et le « prévient » (IO, 65). Pour que l'unité du sujet soit accomplie, le livre devrait être en mesure de ressaisir les bribes des personnages qui gravitent autour de lui, ou bien, de trouver ailleurs le fondement de sa propre parole.

La première partie du récit, la vie en solitude, est une espèce de faux départ. Elle a plutôt la fonction d'identifier et de circonscrire l'espace dans lequel on sera plongé. Car l'histoire de l'abandon de « l'endroit où ils avaient été si longtemps ensemble » (IO,

²⁰ Cf. Tadeusz Kowzan. 1987. « Mise en abyme et théâtralisation dans *Impromptu d'Ohio* et *Catastrophe* de Samuel Beckett », *Phénoménologie et littérature : l'origine de l'œuvre d'art*, Naaman : Editions Sherbrooke, 129.

²¹ Ibid.

61) ne constitue pas, dans un certain sens, le moment où le rapprochement des espaces démarre. Le héros du récit avait pris sa décision misant « sur l'étrangeté » (IO, 61) afin « de sortir là où jamais rien partagé. Rentrer là où jamais rien partagé » (IO, 61). Il faut mettre en évidence la double valeur de la phrase: si d'une part dans la solitude il n'y a pas de partage-communion ; de l'autre, on peut y lire des renvois autoréférentiels: l'écriture de soi, impliquant à priori un partage-intervalle, chemin de dépossession, parcours vers l'étrangeté, ne peut certainement pas centrer son sujet. Et ce n'est que grâce à un écart que le récit peut entreprendre la voie d'approche à l'espace du plateau. La réplique suivante le montre clairement: on avait sommé l'Entendeur de « reste(r) là où nous fûmes si longtemps seuls ensemble, mon ombre te consolera » (IO, 62) : mais sur le plateau il a une ombre pour le consoler, le Lecteur. Les deux parcours ne devaient pas se rencontrer dans un seul et même espace préconstitué. Ils en créent un troisième en creux. De l'écart qui les sépare, un autre chemin se fraye et nous conduit vers la deuxième étape d'IO.

Le vœu d'entreprendre un chemin différent de celui qui a hanté les écrits précédents, celui des écarts, de la nuit, de la « zone obscure » d'il y a si longtemps « comme si jamais été » (IO, 63) ne tient pas. Et il n'est pas un hasard si la structure de cette pièce reprend celle de *La dernière bande* où la « révélation », comme on l'a appelée, est mise en scène ou plutôt racontée. Et il serait également possible que « les terrifiants symptômes décrits tout au long de la page quarante, paragraphe quatre » (IO, 63) soient bien un renvoi à cette autre pièce. On sait que l'œuvre de Beckett est un seul tissage de références aux textes précédents et d'annonces des étapes à venir. De même, dans IO tout est annoncé : le nouveau départ par la nouvelle page du livre, « (*il tourne la page*) » (IO, 63) et la deuxième reprise, départ décalé est bien marquée par la répétition des tout premiers mots : « Il reste peu à dire. » (IO, 64).

II

L'espace du récit et celui du plateau apparemment se superposent dans ce deuxième temps. Le texte désormais raconte l'histoire commune du Lecteur, de l'Entendeur et de leurs avatars. La parole essaie de se joindre à la représentation : néanmoins, aucune phrase ne peut pas s'ancrer dans le plateau. Tout en débordant ce cadre, elle remonte jusqu'à l'arrivée du visiteur-Lecteur sur le plateau et couvre un temps indéfini qui se dégage de la singularité de l'action jusqu'à arriver à l'épuisement du livre. De surcroît, aucun fragment de cette histoire ne centre pas l'action en déroulement : le récit se soumet à la réitération des départs et des nouvelles apparitions du visiteur et les temps verbaux disloquent l'événement raconté dans un autre temps. Le texte ne se laisse pas prendre par le joug de la mimésis parce que tout contracté qu'il est, il a néanmoins le pouvoir de s'étirer démesurément sur ce ressassement des allées et venues – « Plus tard il reparut » (IO, 64), « Ainsi de temps en temps » (IO, 65). Cette lecture ressassante

aspire à «endormir la longue nuit» (*IO*, 65) et donc à fuir les conséquences du choix de jadis et sa terreur. C'est comme si remettre sa propre histoire à quelqu'un d'autre et en être seulement l'Entendeur pouvait nous en débarrasser, et comme si le ressassement de la triste histoire pouvait ressaisir les bribes de la vie et en reconstituer une entière.

On s'attendait, dans ce deuxième moment, à ce que la présence soit atteinte : au contraire, ce n'est jamais lorsqu'on est au plus près de la représentation que la présence peut s'imposer. Car « On n'est jamais aussi loin du centre que lorsqu'on croit avoir rejoint l'origine du moi dans telle ou telle expérience empirique considérée comme cause »²². Toujours la conscience du langage s'interpose – que ce soit soumission à ses conditions et modalités particulières ou exploitation de celles-ci: « L'aliénation profonde éprouvée par toute pensée en face de sa propre expression reparait chez tous ceux qui manient sérieusement le langage. »²³. Et en effet, à ce moment où les conditions pour le comblement de l'écart semblaient favorables, l'autre instance, la chère personne qui était apparue en rêve, est également, même du point de vue linguistique, en jeu.

« On me dépêche – et de nommer le cher nom – aux fins de te consoler » (*IO*, 64). Cette phrase du récit pourrait être bien une réplique de l'action qui se joue sur le plateau. Il s'agit de l'explication d'une expérience en déroulement, c'est-à-dire qu'elle est expression d'une conscience réflexive. Rien qu'une phrase de telle sorte ne pourrait permettre d'envisager une coïncidence des espaces. Néanmoins, elle n'arrive pas à rendre effective l'unité puisque le sujet de la phrase n'en demeure pas moins impersonnel et son nom n'est pas prononcé. Et la clé de *IO*, l'écart qui ne pourra pas être comblé, gît justement dans ce pronom impersonnel qui évoque, lui aussi, une partie de l'unité partagée par la présence du livre. On reparlera après de son rôle et de sa place dans la pièce. L'espoir de devenir «un seul» (*IO*, 65) par effet de cette lecture qui les réunit autour de la table, qui les rapproche sur le plateau, et qui les déclare «un seul» dans l'écriture, ne peut que passer par la comparaison «comme», et par «*Aussi ressemblants que possible* » (*IO*, 59) sur le plateau.

Comme on l'a dit, la parole dépasse la réalité prétendue du théâtre et ses possibles: les acteurs n'approcheront leurs mains qu'à la fin de la pièce alors que la parole montre les conséquences de cet acte comme s'il avait déjà eu lieu, « il devinrent » (*IO*, 65) ; elle annonce même la fin du livre rétablissant de manière nette la fracture entre les espaces : « Vint la nuit enfin où ayant refermé le livre » (*IO*, 65). C'est à ce moment qu'on se rend compte que ni le plateau peut contenir la « triste histoire » (*IO*, 66), ni celle-ci peut contenir le plateau. La situation de la troisième étape n'est pas analogue à

²² Paul De Man. 1966. « La circularité de l'interprétation dans l'œuvre critique de Maurice Blanchot ». *Critique* Juin 229, 547-560.

²³ *Id.* 550.

la première : l'écriture n'est plus délibérément partage et éloignement. Il y aura une parole qui déborde la « triste histoire » et qui, d'après notre lecture, dépasse l'espace du plateau. On croit que toutes ces tensions, ces étirements, ont ouvert un espace pour le déroulement de la parole en dehors de tout cadre jusqu'ici reconnu. Le texte revient finalement dans le livre, au livre ; mais celui-ci, en dépit de sa matérialité sur le plateau, n'en demeure pas moins un espace presque insaisissable et qui donne à la parole un statut tout à fait particulier.

III

Le livre est étranger au Lecteur et à l'Entendeur de même que les personnages du récit par rapport au récit lui-même. Une phrase à la troisième personne, « Finalement il dit » (*IO*, 65) introduit une réplique au discours direct : « On m'a prévenu – et de nommer le cher nom – que je ne reviendrai plus. J'ai vu le cher visage et entendu les mots muets, Plus besoin de retourner chez lui, même si tu en avais le pouvoir » (*IO*, 65). La première personne fait référence au visiteur : il n'y a pas de doute pour la première partie de la réplique. Quant à ce qui suit, deux options sont possibles. C'est encore du discours direct prononcé par le visiteur, qui dit à son compagnon de ne plus retourner auprès de la chère personne, de ne plus revenir sur ses pas ; ou bien, après la virgule, les mots sont de la chère personne et rapportés par le visiteur : ce serait donc lui qui n'ira plus voir son compagnon pour le consoler. Ces deux lectures du passage scellent simplement le renoncement et l'échec – rappelons qu'on parle de l'écriture et de ses moyens : rendu au constat que rien ne changerait, nulle démarche n'a de valeur. Accepter ces hypothèses signifierait nier à l'œuvre de Beckett tout progrès depuis la rédaction de la *trilogie*. On se remettrait encore au constat de Bruno Clément qui dit que « La réussite est au prix de l'échec. La coïncidence de l'écart. »²⁴.

Néanmoins, si l'on relève toute l'ambigüité du deuxième cas, la possibilité d'un autre essor, d'une interprétation différente nous est offerte. Les mots « Plus besoin de retourner chez lui », discours direct introduit par la majuscule, sont adressés au visiteur et c'est la troisième instance qui s'en charge. La paradoxale prise de parole d'un personnage absent permet de percevoir l'ambigüité même dans la phrase qui précède et, en partie, peut l'expliquer. « J'ai vu le cher visage et entendu les mots muets ». Quand c'était le héros du récit qui avait vu en rêve le cher visage et entendu les mots muets, il s'agissait du visage et des mots de la troisième instance. Alors qu'ici, c'est elle qui a pu, par le biais de l'action conjointe de la représentation sur le plateau et de l'écriture, c'est-à-dire de ses avatars le héros et l'Entendeur, le visiteur et le Lecteur, voir son propre cher visage et entendre ses propres mots. L'écriture atteindrait ici la

²⁴Bruno Clément. *Op. Cit.* 195.

présence dans la lueur extrêmement discrète de la conscience, de sa propre conscience, de sa compréhension, dans sa manifestation pure.

La troisième instance, qui ne s'était vue qu'en bribes dans une histoire ressassée qu'elle n'arrivait pas à assumer, partie de l'unité partagée par l'acte d'écriture, se pose comme matrice et origine de toute la pièce, tout en gardant ouvert un écart puisque de manière effective nul changement n'arrive, aucune synthèse n'est possible sans que tout se gâche par l'interposition du corps sur le plateau ou d'une parole autre que muette. Néanmoins, tout ne pourra que disparaître, c'est la « dernière fois » (*IO*, 66). Le temps reste suspendu, c'est l'aube mais il ne fait pas jour ni il n'y a de signal de reprise, « bruit de résurrection » (*IO*, 66). Cette présence tangentielle qui a pu se manifester grâce aux différents écarts n'a pas pris place sur le même niveau des pôles qui se faisaient face : le récit aussi bien que le plateau sont deux espaces en abyme, comme les personnages qui les habitent, « abîmés dans qui sait quelles pensées » (*IO*, 66). Ils ont toujours été dans un espace de représentation, ils ont vécu dans des énoncés, trop proches de leur propre histoire pour qu'ils puissent se charger de cette expression. Par cette double construction fictionnelle, regard sur soi-même, écoute de sa propre histoire, la conscience s'est détachée de ses objets de cendre afin de déclarer encore une fois que la conscience ne peut dire que la conscience d'avoir conscience. Ou bien la conscience de l'inconscience de son objet.

Finalement, la coïncidence des espaces est atteinte par leur englobement dans un autre, suspendu. La triste histoire et le plateau seraient à considérer les deux comme des abîmes et est détruite « any illusion of hierarchic relation » en faveur d'une « mutual determination »²⁵. C'est leur interaction qui donne le résultat, résultat extrêmement précaire, qui se situe dans un autre espace, tangentiel et tout de suite posthume, postérieur à l'œuvre, que seule la lecture critique peut nommer. D'ailleurs, il s'agit d'une borne que l'œuvre s'impose et dont Clément s'est bien aperçu : « Seule une autre "façon" pourrait peut-être dire "l'autre chose", l'essentiel »²⁶. Janvier aussi saisit très bien ce renvoie continu à l'ailleurs et il parle de la fonction $x+1$ ²⁷. Car l'écart d'où jaillit l'écriture ne peut pas être définitivement clos, il faut le relancer, sinon on serait à jamais dans le silence. « Aussi est-il important que la représentation s'arrête un instant avant la vérité ; et seule est vraie la représentation qui représente aussi l'écart entre elle-même et la vérité. »²⁸. La nécessité de la critique gît dans ce seul infime créneau qu'elle non plus ne peut combler mais uniquement mettre en évidence.

²⁵ Kathleen O'Gorman. « The Speech Act in Beckett's Ohio Impromptu ». Ed. Davis, Robin J. et Butler, Lance St. J. *Make Sense Who May. Essays on Samuel Beckett's Later Works. Irish Literary Studies* 30, Buckinghamshire : Colin Smythe limited, 116.

²⁶ Bruno Clément. *Op. Cit.* 190.

²⁷ Ludovic Janvier. 1966. *Samuel Beckett par lui-même*. Paris : Seuil.

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben. 2006. *Idée de la prose*, Paris : Christian Bourgois éditeur, 7.

Conclusion

Cette lecture s'approche de *IO* comme une recherche qui concerne, au fond, le langage, qui se situe et demeure consciemment dans le domaine du langage. Il s'agit d'un chemin tellement centré sur les échecs et les possibilités de la parole, tellement tortueux, que la narration et la représentation ne se déploient pas aisément et qu'elles dépendent toujours de l'énonciation. Si l'on devait faire confiance à l'une des différences «substantielles» entre modernisme et postmodernisme, rien n'empêcherait de ranger la pièce sous le signe de la « metalingual self-reflection »²⁹ et donc du modernisme, en raison d'une « epistemological dominant » qui caractérise ses mouvements à la recherche d'un fondement, d'un principe premier qui soutient la fiction. L'opposition des dominantes épistémologique et ontologique, toutefois, ne doit pas trancher la question puisqu'on ne prétend pas qu'elle soit absolue : « the dominant specifies the *order* in which different aspects are to be attended to, so that, although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodern text about its epistemological implications, it is more *urgent* to interrogate it about its ontological implications »³⁰.

D'autre part, l'indétermination générale de la catégorie même de postmodernisme complique le rapprochement de la pièce à cette esthétique : même les caractères que l'on avait cités d'après McHale et qui induiraient à situer *IO* dans ce domaine, sont présents déjà en d'autres époques, des époques les plus disparates. On se rend compte que c'est encore un critère qui ne tient pas. De plus, Remo Ceserani le dit clairement : ce n'est pas le cas de « cercare di identificare l'arte o la letteratura postmoderna con una precisa poetica, con un sistema retorico coerente e stringente, uno stile, una modalità di scrittura tipica e individuante »³¹.

Déjà ces considérations suffiraient à mettre en question un classement trop net de la pièce. Et pourtant ce n'est pas seulement sur ces points que notre analyse définit une distance définitive de *IO* par rapport aux modalités et attitudes du postmodernisme auquel il semblait si facile de l'assimiler. Cette pièce à l'air d'un jouet mécanique, apparemment anodine et auto-complaisante, sorte d'exercice de style ou pièce d'occasion³², est au fond bien lointaine, on l'a démontré, de la gratuité qui caractérise le postmodernisme en tant que conscience de la fin de toute narration, horizon ultime qui obligerait la littérature à se replier sur les anciens modèles pour les réproposer de manière parodique ou bien de renoncer complètement à elle-même (« literature does

²⁹ Douwe Fokkema. *Op. Cit.*

³⁰ *Ibid.* 11.

³¹ Remo Ceserani. 1997. *Raccontare il postmoderno*. Torino : Bollati Boringhieri, 135.

³² Rappelons que *IO* a été rédigé en occasion du symposium de 1981 sous demande de Gontarski.

not suffice »³³). Nulle gratuité chez Beckett: souvent dénoncée, elle ne préside jamais aux modalités de son écriture qui est, bien au contraire, expression d'une nécessité unique. Tous ces procédés que l'on a mis en évidence, loin d'éviter l'écriture, visent à la mener vers une présence ultérieure.

Laura Cerrato affirme que « Beckett's aesthetic of failure » est au delà du postmodernisme, que « in Beckett's work, postmodernism transcends itself »³⁴. C'est peut-être vrai. En effet, l'écriture de Beckett est toujours située dans un espace de postérité. Mais ce que ce *post* accueille n'est pas du vide, mais le lieu, tout labile et discret qu'il soit, de la présence.

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³³ Ihab Habib Hassan. *Op. Cit.*

³⁴ Laura Cerrato. 1992. « Postmodernism and Beckett's aesthetic of failure » *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 2, « Beckett in the 1990's » Amsterdam/New York : Rodopi, 21-29.

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CHIARA SIMONIGH

AROUND AND ABOUT THE LOOK:Samuel Beckett's *Film*

To my late, lamented friend and colleague Stefano Bajma Griga, a fine knower of Beckett and a profoundly Beckettian spirit.

From April 5th to May 22th 1963, Samuel Beckett worked on his screenplay for *Film*,¹ as can be gathered from a notebook housed at the Beckett Archive at the University of Reading. The work was originally meant to be part of a trilogy (never completed) by Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter. Beckett asked the American stage director Alan Schneider to direct the film and Buster Keaton to play its leading role. Schneider accepted even though he had never before worked in cinema.

The title, *Film*, immediately reveals that it is a kind of statement of poetics or style, where Beckett typically juxtaposes the simplest of life's experiences with the most absolute of its questions. Beckett did not want to present a film to the public, but rather an *exemplum* of a film as part of his meta-discourse and meta-art that characterize his poetics and his style.

As a matter of fact, *Film* is probably one of the most remarkable results of Beckett's research into dramatic form as an expression of the human condition in late modernity. (Brater 1986, 3-12; Cascetta 2000; Bajma Griga 2001) Such a radical kind of research probes the essence of dramatization and questions the status of the performance and the act of looking. (Ferri 2012, 189-215; Serpieri 1996, 733-763) It challenges the notions of subjectivity and consciousness, which were at a historical crisis point. (Cohn 1965; Lamont 1970; Beja, Gontarski, Astier 1983).

Film is a piece of research that fits well the definition of what Martin Esslin termed a "visual lyric" (Esslin 1987, 35-49) – i.e. a work that aspires to that iconographic ideal of contemporary drama, something that Beckett gave life to as he was working on *Film*, an ideal that embraces theater, television and cinema. About a year before *Film*, the disembodied head in *Happy Days* and the urns and reflectors in *Play* are the means that, over a short span of time, conduct this investigation to the limits of representation and

¹ *Film*, directed by: Alan Schneider; Writing: Samuel Beckett; Cast: Buster Keaton, Nell Harrison, James Karen, Susan Reed; Cinematography by: Boris Kaufman; Film Editing by: Sidney Meyers; Art Direction by: Burr Smidt; Running time 24 minutes; Country: United States, 1965.

drama. In Beckett's *dramaticules*, furthermore, the mouth in *Not I* and the face in *That Time* shine out of the darkness and are made visible through a kind of lighting that seems to mimic a cinematic or television close-up. In his television drama, *Eh Joe*, the television camera comes so close to a face that the spectator may feel that he is entering the character's mind. (McMillan 1986 38-44; Mucci 1997, 431-439)

Such an elision of the forms of representation and drama coincides with an essential abstraction that is capable of giving new opportunities to experience in the era of the destruction of experience and capable of plumbing the depths of the human in the era of the crisis of humanity of the human being. All of this is also present in *Film*, a work without shapes of colors, sounds, noises, or words.²

The sole protagonist is faceless and is filmed constantly from behind. First, he runs along a wall and encounters a man and a woman who are horrified when they see him. Then, he goes up the stairs of a building and encounters an old woman who, when she looks at him, is astonished. Then, he enters a room, closes the curtains of a window, and covers a mirror with a drape. He looks at an unframed picture on the wall of a bearded man with prominent eyes (perhaps a god of classical antiquity) and rips it up. He looks at and chases a dog and a cat out of the room. He looks at a parrot in a cage and a goldfish in a glass tank and covers them with a drape. Finally, he sits down in a rocking chair and looks at some photos that picture him at significant moments in his life. Then he drowns off. Suddenly, he wakes up and feels that he is being observed. He covers his face, which is finally revealed to the spectator for an instant. His face appears with its left eye covered with a patch. Then he drowns off again until he wakes up again with a start and sees the person who is looking at him in front of him – that is, he sees himself. Finally, he closes his eyes and the image blackens out.

In the *Film* screenplay, Beckett gives unusually minute directions about the movements of the actor and camera. Naturally, the direction of the camera-movement is the novelty that does not appear in stage dramas.³ (Foucré 1970; Dort 347-359; Kalb 1989, 21-37; Puliani and Forlani 2006) The great cinematographer Boris Kaufman, the brother of Dziga Vertov (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929) was chosen to handle the camera.

² At first, Beckett had conceived of *Film* as a filmic work whose sound track was to include noises and music from Franz Schubert's *Doppelgänger* (Atik 2007, 25-26).

³ In regard to this, it is interesting enough to read what Alan Schneider had to say: "I [...] decided that my early academic training in physics and geometry was finally going to pay off in my directorial career. Came then almost a year of preparation. Reading and rereading the "script," which, of course, had no dialogue (with the exception of that one whispered "sssh!"); asking Sam a thousand questions [...]; trying to visualize graphically and specifically the varied demands of those six tantalizing pages. Gradually, the mysteries and enigmas, common denominators of all new Beckett works, came into focus with fascinatingly simple clarity. The audacity of his concept—a highly disciplined use of two specific camera viewpoints—emerged from behind all the seeming ambiguities of the technical explanations. [...] I began to work out a tentative shooting script." (Schneider A. 1969, 123-124).

For most of the film, the protagonist is perceived by a camera that is constantly positioned directly behind his back. However, when the angle between the protagonist and the camera is less than 45°, it is as if the man notices it and shows his anguish by stopping any movement he is making. Specifically, the relationship between the protagonist and the camera goes through three distinct phases. In the first part of the film, which takes place in the street and on the stairs, the angle is less than 45° and it is as if the protagonist were not aware of being perceived while he is moving. In the second part, when he enters the room, the angle of the shot that allows him not to be looked in the face increases to 90° in view of the limited space; and, every time this angle risks being reduced to fewer than 45°, the protagonist stops moving. In the last part of the film, when the protagonist drowns off, the camera takes advantage of his sleep and frees itself from seemingly being limited to positions with less than a 90°-angle freedom of movement behind him. It pushes into the field of vision of the remaining 270°, finally revealing the protagonist's face. The protagonist wakes up with a start and looks at the person who is looking at him. That is, it is himself.

As Beckett specifies in his screenplay, “in order to be figured in this situation the protagonist is sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit. It will not be clear until the end of the film that the pursuing perceiver is not extraneous but self,” (Beckett, 1967, 21). In fact, the ending is an authentic *coup de cinéma*, one that unveils the protagonist's face along with a kind of *mise en abîme* founded on the dialectics between presence and absence. (Robbe-Grillet 1965) This dialogue is featured for most of the film through a masterful use of the cinematographic off-screen, which reveals itself fully on screen at the end, when the camera reveals that everything that the spectator has seen since the beginning was not the objective vision of the camera but the subjective vision of the protagonist of himself.

Hence, the exact directions for movement that Beckett inserted in the screenplay managed to serve his purposes on several levels. As he declared, Beckett, first of all, wanted to take absolute control over the *techne*, over the film apparatus. He wanted to probe its representative potential through speculating about the subjectivity and objectivity of the vision offered to the spectator. Beckett pointed out in the screenplay: “Until the end of the film O [object] is perceived by E [eye] from behind and at an angle not exceeding 45°. Convention: O enters *percipi* = experiences anguish of perceivedness, only when this angle is exceeded” (Beckett, 1984, 164). The surprise effect at the end takes place in virtue of the disorientation experienced by the spectator in front of his or her own interpretation of a representative and dramatic convention in cinema that Beckett takes issue with, speculating on the dialectic between presence and absence as well as between the objectivity and subjectivity of vision. “Subjectivity” refers to that type of shot and convention of representation and drama in which the look of the spectator coincides with the look of the character, determining a psychological transference between the first and the second. The precise directions for camera movement that Beckett inserted in the screenplay transform the camera into a

dramatis persona, one who, in the role of an authentic co-protagonist, interacts with the actor from the very beginning, initiating a silent and dynamic dialogue with him. (Schneider 1997) The entire structure of the film is entrusted to a *sui generis* dialogue and a transference of a look that starts out as objective and ends up as subjective, crossing through the various phases of the act of observation little by little, phases that correspond, in turn, to an equal number of the varieties in the reciprocal relationship between character's perceiving and his being perceived. Beside the transference of the look, there is also the transference of a psychological state, caused by the spectators' processes of identification and projection in relation to the protagonist and other characters as well, whether they be people he encounters or animals or the objects that the protagonist feels are looking at him as he gradually covers them with black drapes.

The screenplay, conceived and elaborated in this way, seems to posit itself as a kind of radical piece of research on *the writing of movement* or on the original essence of cinema and the potentials of representation and dramatization entrusted to the vision of movement, and, reciprocally, to the movement of vision, according to a complex relationship, a bi-univocal complementariness and correspondence involving technology, the object of vision, the subject of vision and vision itself. In conducting such a kind of speculation, Beckett makes the actor-camera complex the fulcrum of a symbolism of the perception and self-perception of his *Film*.

Thus it is no accident that Gilles Deleuze refers to *Film* in his book, *Image-Mouvement*, to illustrate the symbolism of perception in its varieties in terms of three filmic conventions that he terms: *image-action*, when the protagonist acts unobserved; *image-perception*, when he stops after he feels he is being observed; and (3) *image-affection*, when he finally observes himself (Deleuze, 1983, 93-97).

In this way, Deleuze's interest in the work of Beckett's may appear instrumental for a definition of image-movement as the matrix and derivative of the other images. The exegesis of *Film* that results from a such a theoretical reflection leads Deleuze to maintain that the final black screen refers us back to sleep, to death, or to that last and first nothing, meant as the image-movement, where every human being will sink at the beginning just as at the end of his being. For this reason, the protagonist's attempt to remove himself from his own look and that of others should be interpreted, according to Deleuze, as the expression of the will not to exist.

This is an interpretation -- that of Deleuze -- that seems to be legitimized by the quotation of George Berkeley's famous formula, *esse est percipi*, which Beckett introduces in the screenplay, and, furthermore, has legitimized many to maintain that *Film* consists in a cinematographic illustration of the principle of Immaterialism theorized by the Irish bishop in the seventeenth century.⁴

⁴ "Film is an illustration of the philosophical principle, 'esse est percipi'" (Bertineti 2002, XXVII). Cf. Bertineti P. 2009, 76-81; Sulpizio 2007, 83-100; Michelone 1999, 110-130.

Nevertheless, one could hold the position, which is perhaps just as legitimate, that the symbolism of perception in *Film* presents us with resonance and refraction in relation to a *quaestio* addressed to theoretical demands that are not as remote as Immaterialism and are much closer to Beckett, not only from the point of view of history.

In the first place, one could consider the conception of vision and of the visible represented in *Film* as a natural transition of the reflection by Beckett developed in those years even through short stories like *L'image* (1958-60) and *Imagination morte imaginez* (1965). In the latter, for example, an eye opens and nevertheless can never see or be seen by the eye of the other body, co-protagonist of the story, just as what happens in *Film* through the silent, dynamic, and, as it were, impossible dialogue between the man and the camera.

Then, in the story, *L'image*, there is a reference to philosopher Nicholas Malebranche, whose function is somewhat analogous to that of the quotation from Berkeley in the screenplay of *Film*, or, and evocation of thought suspended between a past marked by the divine and a present dominated by the death of God.⁵ As Renato Oliva points out in reference to the story written between 1959 and 1960: “once the faith in that God who acts as the guardian of the relationship between the soul and the body disappears ... there is nothing left but the complex and extremely exact spectacle of a universal clock without a Clockmaker or clockmaker” (Oliva, 1989, 15).

One might also observe how in *Film* this “complex and extremely exact spectacle is an extreme step of a kind of *cosmoclastia* or “cosmos-breaking” determined by a look that is no longer subjective but objective and objectual. This *cosmoclastia* is expressed by the symbolism of perception and self-perception that is founded on the actor-camera complex. In reference to the role of the actor and of recited drama, it is evident that the symbolism of perception and self-perception is entrusted to gestural movement of abstract value, which is the exact stylistic code of Buster Keaton’s comedy. (Celati 1997; Tinazzi 1993)

Furthermore, the abstract and ideal value of the movement is reached through recourse to that gestural typology defined by Eisenstein as the “gesture of rejection” and considered by him to be one of the foundations of his cinematic aesthetics based on Marxist dialectical thought and, particularly, on the value of the negative (we may recall that Beckett wrote a letter to the Latvian director and theoretician to propose that he collaborate with him, unfortunately never received.) The substance of the protagonist’s

⁵ The expression in *L'image*: “It [the dog] had the same notion at the same instant Malebranche” is an index of the suspension between a past marked by the divine and a present dominated by the death of God in as much as the implicit reference in the passage cited by Beckett is naturally a reference to Malebranche’s reflection on the instant, which is understood as the instant in which the movement is made that manifests the concurrence of the will of God and that of the human being (Beckett 1995, 165).

movement, in effect, consists in a negation of the self that manifests itself in his constant removing himself from the look of others and himself. Effectively, his blinding himself and chasing out the animals that he felt were observing him is to be interpreted in this way, according to the modes and forms that repeat the celebrated sight gags in which Keaton combats, as André Bazin says, his personal war against the world, even the animal and objectual world that punctually turns against him, alienating and reifying him.⁶

This is a gesture of rejection through which the protagonist denies the sight of his own face to others, to the camera and, finally, to himself. The famous “face that never smiles” of Keaton’s appears like this in the ending with all of the expressive strength of a look that has become famous for being alienated and alienating and that implicitly evokes his own self-perception, expressed in a tragicomic manner in the meta-cinematographic works that he directed or co-directed, such as *The Cameraman*, where the protagonist uses technological equipment to recognize himself and have others recognize him.

One could maintain that the gesture of rejection of the look made by Beckett through the silent and dynamic dialogue activated by the actor-camera complex constitutes a kind of absolute negation with a radical critical value in the face of a world and a technology of power of alienation and reification. (Maude 2009) These are critiques that, again through refraction and resonance, can be seen to re-emerge in the context of the philosophical reflection animated by critical thought and theory, *in primis*, of Theodor Adorno, who, as is known, insists on negation and its function both from the ideological and aesthetic point of view in the works of Beckett.⁷

Nevertheless, the reflection developed on *techne* by Beckett through this meta-cinematographic work does not seem to develop in the direction of critical thought as much as towards a more general speculation of an aesthetic nature on the relationship between the “eye of the twentieth century” – that is, cinema – and some pre-eminent issues of his era.

⁶ “Slapstick is first and foremost, or at least also, the dramatic expression of the tyranny of things, out of which Keaton even more than Chaplin knew how to create a tragedy of the Object.” (Bazin 2005, 121)

⁷ In Beckett’s works, “the content becomes its formal principle and the negation of content altogether. Beckett’s oeuvre gives the frightful answer to art that by its starting point, by its distance from any praxis, art in the face of mortal threat becomes ideology through the harmlessness of its mere form, regardless of its content.” (Adorno 2005, 339). This observation made by Paolo Bertinetti can be shared: “The postulate from which Beckett begins is that realism no longer has the instruments necessary to represent reality. Therefore there should be other roads to go down. His is the road of the emptying of traditional forms and the proposal of that absolute negativity that, proclaimed by his admirer Adorno, incarnated horror without compromise and thus served freedom.” (Bertinetti 2009, 77).

For these reasons, Beckett's speculation could somehow place itself in resonance with the thought of Merleau-Ponty on cinema expressed in his book, *Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie* (1948): cinema "shows us the correspondence between thought and techniques; in fact, cinema, joins with philosophy because "it presents us with every consciousness thrown into the world, submitted to the look of the other" (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 80).

"Argument of the film: Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception," Beckett writes in his screenplay. The protagonist "E is therefore at pains throughout pursuit to keep within this 'angle of immunity' [where he is not seen by others]." He is "hastening *blindly* to illusory sanctuary" away from the world, but this attempt, Beckett adds meaningfully, "culminates in the inevitability of self-perception." He warns, "No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience" (Beckett, 1984, 163). This last warning of Beckett's is such that it sheds light on the absolute correspondence between the technical-formal apparatus and the themes of perception and of being that were being critiqued by various mid-twentieth century theories – those that postulated the crisis of the notions of subject, consciousness, and existence, with the consequent inclination towards self-analysis and self-reflection.

Film offers the spectator the phenomenology of the perception of a body who is at the same time seeing and able to be seen, but who, in order to see himself, "needs someone who observes him" (again, in the words of Merleau-Ponty) and who sends him back "his image in an unexpected manner" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, 157-158). Nevertheless, this sending back of the image given by the look of the other appears, under these circumstances, not so much as a mirroring or restitution of the Ego as it is an alienating and reifying power play, capable of demonstrating -- exactly, in the *being-thrown-into-the-world/Geworfenheit* – the crisis of the subject, his consciousness, and his existence.

It is no accident that the screenplay of *Film* brings a reference to the economic crisis through the setting of the dialogue between Eye and Object in New York in 1929. Although no explicit historical contextualization appears in the completed film, it is evident that Object is shown while he is wandering through the sparse ruins of a metropolis or, *in extenso*, of the world, taken almost as the equivalent of the *lacrimae rerum* of an indefinite Great Crisis, according to a setting that is in some ways similar to what Adorno gathered in *Endgame* and that can make us recognize a relationship of *sui generis* reciprocity between the works of the playwright and the philosopher, a relationship that could be defined as the emblem of refractiveness much more than resonance: "Whereas pre-Beckett existentialism cannibalized philosophy for poetic purposes, Beckett, as educated as anyone, presents the bill: philosophy, or spirit itself, proclaims its bankruptcy and the dreamlike dross of the experiential word, and the poetic process shows itself as worn out" (Adorno, 2000, 335).

The *percipi* of *Film* presents some refractiveness and some resonance with phenomenological and existentialist *percipi*, particularly the *percipi* whose being Jean Paul Sartre investigates in a good part of *Being and Nothingness*, much beyond the chapter entitled “The Being of the *Percipi*.”

At the beginning of *Film*, the man appears to the spectator, the other, and himself as an authentic object, a “blind and deaf thing.” He is there and that is all. He acts mysteriously, lacking, as Sartre would say, any *raisons* or motivations. When Object enters the room and iterates the moving gestures of his rejection of the look of others and of himself, then his consciousness emerges, which does not receive the “in-self” passively, but inserts it into a framework of sense that goes beyond ugly factualness. The being of *percipi* and also of *percipiens* is discovered -- or rather, those figments and acts of the imagination that will lead all the way to the phantasms of the double.

For that reason, the rejection of the look of the Other, as Beckett writes in the screenplay, inevitably culminates in self-perception. This may happen -- to return to Sartre -- in view of this: “simply because I am my own mediator between Me and Me, all objectivity disappears” (Sartre 1992, 366). Inserting Object inside the frame of figments and acts of the imagination, the consciousness negates this Object just as the “in-self” “un-realizes” it, in the manner of Sartre. The relationship between the “in-itself” and the “for-itself” -- in function of the relationship between objectification and consciousness, which emerges in this way -- demonstrates a consonance with the theorization of the “for-others” that Sartre elaborates through the thematization of shame.⁸

Observing the development of the work from this perspective of refractiveness, the phases of a totalizing crisis manifest themselves, a crisis that assails the humanity of the man through subjectivity, consciousness and existence.

At first, the protagonist is an object both for the other characters and for the spectator. After that, in the solitude of the room, he appears to the spectator as a subject who is observing things, and through these things, himself. (Schneider 1994) That is, a consciousness appears gradually in the protagonist. This consciousness is in some way a reflection in two meanings of the term. First, it is a reflection given by self-perception that realizes the doubling of the identity. (It is no accident that the first gesture completed by the protagonist when he enters the room is that of covering the mirror).

⁸ “The Being of the *Percipi*” constitutes a fundamental thematization in the “Search for being” with which Sartre opens his introductory chapter of *Being and Nothingness* and with which he dwells on, in the third part of the book, the reflection on the look and especially on the “Look of the other” and on the “being-seen-by-the-others.” This last reflection is entirely focused on shame: “It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other’s look and myself at the end of the look. It is the shame or pride which makes me live not know the situation of being looked at. Now shame, as we noted at the beginning of the chapter, is shame of self. It is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed the object which the Other is looking at and judging.” (Sartre 1992, 350).

Second, his consciousness is a reflection that denotes self-reflection and self-analysis through thought. One of the last gestures that the protagonist completes is, not accidentally, that of observing the photographs that portray his life through his relationship with his mother, his father, his friends, and his wife.

However, it happens that, while the spectator is beginning to see him and, above all, to understand him as a subject, the protagonist begins to perceive and understand himself as an object. In fact, he begins to feel that he is being observed by the animals and things: the image of (perhaps) a god of classical antiquity hanging on the wall, the crest rail of a rocking chair that has two openings similar to eyes, the two eye-like buttons-and-string of the large envelope where the photographs are kept. In this way, he has an extraordinary though painful anti-climax that culminates in the *coup de cinéma* of the man alone with himself. Beckett writes in the screenplay, “All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being” (Beckett, 1984, 165). Nevertheless, if the perception of the self continues to exist, it exists by now as self-perception of an object. The protagonist participates in the condition of the objects. This is the last port of call of the circumnavigation of his self-consciousness.

From Sartre’s “hell is the others” one proceeds backwards, *à rebours*, to Hugo’s “hell of solitude.” In solitude, the consciousness of the protagonist, through shame, little by little introjects the alienating look of the other and turns it back against himself. Not only that, however, consciousness -- the ultimate product of human evolution that allows thought, action and being to react to itself, to give itself feedback -- regresses until it again becomes a kind of archaic paleo-consciousness, which is represented by the double. (Badiou 2008) The alienating power of the look of the other, inflicted on oneself, doubles its power, according to a deleterious *transference*. The protagonist becomes pure object and pure eye to himself.

Such an anticlimax allows the spectator to see and understand the regression of the protagonist’s consciousness, which coincides with the transference of subjectivity and humanity to animals and things and, at the same time, which realizes a progressive stripping away of humanity. The gesture with which the protagonist rips us the photographs of his affections – in as much as they are the extinction of feeling and the removal of identity – appears as the ultimate and definitive act of loss of his own humanity, which, not accidentally, immediately follows the final epiphany of the double.

Hence the anti-climax conceived of by Beckett consists in a *crescendo* of de-humanization manifested by gestures of rejection that are little by little increasingly symbolic, little by little increasingly abstract, and little by little increasingly cut off from reality, which express the loss of the principle of reality in the very forms of the objectification of the absurd. (Gontarsky 1997)

The spectator observes a consciousness blinded by its own power of observation and dazzled by reflections in the mirrors of objectivity and subjectivity, which, from

supreme human aspiration, is degraded into the lowest, most miserable, and most inhuman one. Consciousness is an uncertain and oscillating reflection, born in history, living through its personal history, and subjected to history and can be extinguished easily by a gust of wind that, once more, is historical.

In fact, a last clue in the screenplay goes right in this direction and is the date, 1913, which appears cancelled and substituted by Beckett with the date 1929. Therefore he is not only a posthumous man, a man degraded to Eye and Object in the pure state, but he is also a man who is about to move towards the crisis and barbarism of the Great War. Nevertheless, it is evident at his point that it could indifferently have to do with World War II or any war, given the power of the abstraction of the work. (Fruttero 1994; Id. 1956; Restivo 1991)

Therefore the anticlimax of this man appears as a kind of dramatization of the phases of a regressive process of humanity. This is a cruel but necessary dramatization in as far as it contemporaneously addresses the spectator with a trans-historical observation and a warning about the fact that the uncertainty of the human being between evolution and regression is played out, is recited, once again and always, on the stage of consciousness.

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PERCORSI

FRANCO ARATO

MEMORY AND MOURNING*Tadjo's Loin de Mon Père*

At an exhibition held some years ago in the Johannesburg Art Gallery, dedicated to South African women artists, one could find some photographic self-portraits shot in 2007 by the young talent Gabrielle Goliath titled *Ek is 'n Kimberly, Coloured*. Three photographs of herself had different subtitles: “Sou mulata”, “Je suis une personne métisse”, “Soy una mestiza”. Afrikaans, English, Portuguese, French and Spanish to signify what Gabrielle is, or perhaps is not. *Loin de mon père*, [Far from My Father], the latest novel by the Ivorian writer Véronique Tadjo (2010)¹, is the story of a meeting between two worlds and two ways of living and dying; it is also a chronicle of happiness and sorrow rooted in the reality of *métissage*. In French the words *métisse* and *métissage* are quite common in the vocabulary; however, as Goliath’s multiple portraits suggest, a perfect, equivalent translation does not exist in English, and the term *Coloured* still, at least in South Africa, has a bureaucratic, apartheid-style tone to it².

The title of the book *Loin de mon père* paradoxically does not really mean ‘far, or away, from my father’, but ‘near him’. From the beginning we immediately understand that this book of mourning is based upon a negative that is a positive statement. It is the painful contradiction of Life meeting Death, a presence meeting an absence. Tadjo writes “Nina” and “elle” (she) but we are invited (in a discreet way) to understand these

¹ Véronique Tadjo was born in Paris in 1955 and brought up in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. In 1981 she received a doctorate in African American Studies from the Université de la Sorbonne (Paris). After travelling to the United States, Europe and Africa, she has been living since 2007 in Johannesburg where she is a Professor of French Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand. She is the author of collections of poems: *Latérite*, 1985; *À mi-chemin*, 2000; and of short stories and novels: *À vol d’oiseau*, 1986, 1992²; *Le Royaume aveugle*, 1991; *Champs de bataille et d’amour*, 1999; *Reine Pokou*, 2004 (awarded in 2005 with the “Grand Prix Littéraire d’Afrique Noire”). In 2000 she published *L’Ombre d’Imana*, a travelogue about the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (translated into English as *The Shadow of Imana*, 2002). Tadjo, who is also a painter, writes children’s books with her own illustrations.

² In the novel by Zakes Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* (Mda 2002, 59) we find the ironical question: why did the law (the Immorality Act) speak about “coloured babies”? Were they “polychromatic”? and all the other babies “transparent”?

appellations – often, not always – as implying ‘je, moi’ (I, me). We can describe Tadjó’s work as ‘autofiction’ or autobiography in a fictional form, adopting the formula coined thirty years ago by the writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky, who himself tried to cross the narrow bridge between reality and imagination³ (the subtitle of Tadjó’s book is, *roman*, ‘a novel’, as in Doubrovsky’s *Fils*); to quote a more recent example, one can refer to the reflections on the intertwining between ‘le roman’ and ‘le réel’ made by Philippe Forest, whose theoretical assessments arise also from a personal life’s tragedy, the loss of his four years child⁴. The very first quotation in Tadjó’s book begins with “cette histoire est vraie”, ‘this story is true’, but then ends with the paradoxical “ce qui reste, c’est le mensonge (facétie) de la mémoire”, ‘what is left is the trick of memory’ (*mensonge* literally means ‘a lie’). Who wrote this quotation? The author does not know, for she confesses at the end: “Références perdues. Citation réécrite, ou entièrement de moi?” [Lost references. Is it an accurate rendition of the quote, or entirely mine?]. One wonders if it is an elegant play of hide-and-seek. We can guess the reasons for this reticence. Writing about one’s life and one’s beloved yet tortured country (the Ivory Coast, the fatherland of both Nina and of Tadjó) is not an easy task. It is a story inside History, better still a private mourning and a public one. Indeed the second quotation at the beginning is a *true* statement, a defense of the reliability of oral sources (from a book on the Akan culture by the historian Henriette Diabaté) with this final suggestion: “ne dis plus rien; ce que tu as dit est exacte” [don’t say more, what you have said is accurate]. We must believe that what Tadjó recounts, through the medium of Nina, is ontologically, if not historically, true.

The life of Nina – as I mentioned before – is a typical case, even if not always a happy one, of the encounter between different cultures and spaces, history and geography. A French mother and Ivorian father: motherland versus fatherland (in this case it is the French language that lacks an equivalent to express this polarization)⁵. Nina has difficulties in understanding the Ivory Coast that she knew before because of the civil war. At the same time, she has to cope with the long shadow of her father, the renowned medical doctor Kouadio Yao, who has just died, and whose disturbing secrets Nina starts to discover little by little. The country is in the middle of a violent political crisis, but the old rituals of mourning remain unchanged.

The imposition, and in some cases, acceptance of the Christian religion (in the case of Ivory Coast, Catholicism) did not do away with or mitigate the complex traditional ceremonies of praying and preparing for the burial of the body (lasting even a month). Contrary to this, Western societies try to obliterate intimations of death; in an urban

³ A critical overview can be found in Jeannerelle – Viollet 2007.

⁴ See Forest 1997 and Forest 2007.

⁵ It seems that – at least among ‘classical’ writers’ – only the Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral regularly used the word *matrìe*, ‘motherland’, but it is not idiomatic French (in Italian and Spanish too the words *matrìa* and *mátrìa* are quite unusual).

context, people get to know of the death of a neighbour usually only when reading the obituary in a newspaper. Death has no fascination for the skeptical and the unbeliever, therefore it must remain hidden. It was not always like that. Just a few months before the publication of Tadjó's book an intriguing novel by the Italian writer Licia Giaquinto was published, *La ianara* (*The Shaman*, Milano, Adelphi 2010): it is the story of a woman who has lived for many decades in the mountains and in the small villages of Southern Italy. The "ianara" – perhaps from the Latin *ianua*, meaning 'door' and derived from the dialect of the Irpinia, a province of Campania – was a 'practitioner' who spoke with the dead, performed abortions and assisted the old and the sick as they lay dying. This 'sister of mercy' appears to have been a haunting yet tolerated and necessary figure, possessing a craft handed down from mother to daughter. She was believed to live alone (in fairy tales the devil *must* live in solitude). However, the protagonist of Giaquinto's novel, Adelina, falls platonically in love with the Count, the lord of the village, but finally learns how difficult it is to break the spell of solitude⁶. If we turn again towards African literature, we find in the acclaimed novel by the South African writer Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* (1995), a character, Toloki – a man in this case –, whose task is the caring for the dead. Living in a township near Cape Town, he re-invents for himself the skill of a Professional Mourner, though his life is that of an awkward beggar (his suit often stinks). He struggles to make sense of his experience: "Death – he wonders – lives with us everyday. Indeed our ways of dying are our ways of living. Or should I say our ways of living are our ways of dying?"⁷.

These two very different novels on death can help us understand the world of *Loin de mon père*. In the stories of Adelina and of Toloki, the respective authors lay emphasis on the public and private spaces of death: solitude and solidarity are extremes that can hardly be accommodated. At the time of her arrival in Côte d'Ivoire from France, the experience of solitude⁸ is excruciating for Nina. The first family reunion – her mother, a talented musician, died many years before – is not easy for her. Nina tries to persuade her relatives that her father's funeral should remain a private affair, without the involvement of any political figure. An old relative explains that her desire cannot be fulfilled:

Merci pour ton intervention, Nina. Cependant, il faut savoir que nous ne pouvons pas refuser la participation des officiels. Kouadio, paix à son âme, nous appartient biologiquement, mais pas socialement. C'est une figure publique qui a beaucoup fait pour son pays. On doit lui rendre les hommages qu'il mérite. Il serait scandaleux de n'avoir aucune représentation officielle aux

⁶ A similar figure occurred in the island of Sardinia, as it is shown in another recent Italian novel, *Accabadora* by Michela Murgia, 2009 (the word *accabadora* comes perhaps from the Spanish 'acabar', to finish).

⁷ Mda 1995, 98

⁸ A distinguished German sociologist wrote about the loneliness of the dying in modern times: Elias 1982.

cérémonies. Tout ce que nous pouvons te promettre, c'est que, lorsque la date de l'enterrement aura été arrêtée par la famille, elle ne changera plus. Nous ne céderons à aucune pression extérieure.

[Thank you for your speech, Nina. Nevertheless, you have to know that we cannot refuse the participation of authorities. Kouadio, may he rest in peace, is ours biologically, but not socially. He is a public figure who did so much for his country. We have to pay him the homage he deserves. It would be a scandal if no authority was present at the funeral service. All we can promise is that the date of the burial, as decided by the family, will not change. We will resist any external pressure]⁹.

A host of memories gathers around Nina. Photographs are triggers for happy but also troubling thoughts: children's plays; travels; the happiness of a Saturday afternoon with *papa*; the struggle for freedom when Nina was a teenager; the desire, not satisfied, for a brother; and finally the decision of her older sister, Gabrielle, to desert the family for good (she will never come back, not even on the occasion of her father's funeral). But some things Nina cannot remember, because she ignores many aspects of her father's life. Her cousin Hervé exposes Doctor Kouadio's lies:

Il hésita pendant quelques secondes avant de poursuivre, tel un plongeur trouvant enfin le courage de se lancer du haut de la falaise. "Avant ton arrivée, une femme est venue à la maison. Elle nous a dit qu'elle avait eu un enfant avec ton père, un garçon de neuf ans".

[He hesitated for a while before going on, like a diver who at last plucks up the courage to leap from the cliff. "Before your arrival, a woman came to our house. She told us that she had had a child with your father: the boy is nine now"]¹⁰.

Nina's first reaction is one of disbelief, which is promptly revised when she meets her *new* brother, Koffi: "Elle vit [...] qu'il ressemblait trait pour trait à son père. Mêmes grands yeux noirs, même ovale du visage, même air de famille" [She saw that he looked like his father, in every feature. The same big black eyes; the same oval-shaped face]¹¹.

The *quête*, has just begun: Nina discovers in the course of time new brothers and sisters. As the story develops on, the protagonist and the reader learn about two teenagers, Roland and Cécile, a boy and girl, and an adult man, Amon, who is about Nina's age and who now lives in Canada (he has a wife and a child: he comes back to attend the funeral). Doctor Kouadio technically was not polygamous, because he officially had only one wife; but he had more than one lover and at least four other children. A sort of triumph of virility, silently encouraged by hypocrisy. Many knew, among friends and relatives, but no one spoke about the deeds of this African Don Juan. The slighted Nina refers to this situation as akin to a farce in her conversation with her aunts, who are the keepers of Kouadio's secret:

⁹ Tadjo 2010, 27 (if not otherwise indicated the translations in English are mine).

¹⁰ Ibid., 35.

¹¹ Ibid., 42.

Nina avait l'impression d'être en pleine comédie burlesque. Au point où elle en était, plus rien ne pouvait la toucher: "Vous êtes absolument certaines que c'est tout? Vous comprendrez, j'ai du mal à vous croire, maintenant ...".

[Nina felt as though she was in the middle of a burlesque show. At that point, nothing could affect her anymore: "Are you absolutely sure that's all? You see, it's hard for me to believe you, now ..."]¹².

No, nobody else is identified, but all the lies hurt Nina deeply: she thinks that her father's "enormous, boundless lie", was "like a tree, whose destructive roots, as tentacles, killed everything living around it"¹³.

Nina feels also that she must reopen the book of her personal *Trauerarbeit*, the process of grief (in Freudian terms): the past cannot really be 'healed' or embellished, one must try to understand it. Because spoken words are not always reliable – the words of reluctant eye witnesses for instance –, Nina decides to rummage in her father's journals and letters (the expressive French words are *fouiller* and more specifically, *piocher*, meaning 'to dig'). Tadjó is particularly fond of lists, of objects and facts. Is listing items not the oldest and most elementary form of poetry ranging from Hesiod's enumeration of gods to Homer's catalogue of ships? First, Nina finds a *carnet*, a notebook that belonged to her father, with some autobiographical notes on his studies in France and in the Ivory Coast, and about his early career. The notebook is no more than four pages because the writing was abruptly interrupted (we do not know why). Nina's first reaction is one of deep disappointment:

Aucune émotion ne ressort de ce qu'il a écrit. Il ne parle pas de ses sentiments au moment où il a quitté sa famille, son village. Rien sur ce qu'il a ressenti à son arrivée en France. Rien sur son mariage et sur tout ce qui s'est passé avant. Un désert.

[There was no emotion in what he wrote. He doesn't speak about his feelings when he left his family and his village. Nothing about what he felt when he arrived in France. Nothing about his marriage and, above all, about what happened before. A desert]¹⁴.

The daughter tries to understand her father's failure to write about his emotions, she is conscious that "entre ses parents, ce ne fut pas le coup de foudre" [between her parents, it was not love at first sight]¹⁵. It was more like a 'forced' marriage in post-war Paris, where a charming French girl, Héléne, met Kouadio, a brilliant, yet poor student. A baby (Gabrielle, Nina's older sister) was the fruit of the inexperienced love between those two university students. Nina finds among her father's papers something that is

¹² Ibid., 124.

¹³ Ibid., 125.

¹⁴ Tadjó 2010, 49.

¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

far more interesting than his interrupted, elusive autobiography: the bridal contract with “la dote à la future épouse”, the dowry for the future spouse, provided by Héléne’s parents. It is a rich dowry, including the free use of a flat for five years in Paris. Nina’s commentary is: “Générosité ou extrême arrogance?”, generosity or extreme arrogance?¹⁶, she wonders if Héléne’s parents wanted to help or to humiliate the young African man. After decades, it is difficult to say but we understand that Nina’s heart is beating at the rhythm of her father’s youthful distress.

Tadjo in some cases chooses a nominal syntax, in a way that refers to the typically French genre of the “poème en prose” she has already experimented with in her earlier books. Here is for instance the description of Gabrielle, the not yet born sister in her mother’s womb:

Tam-tam du cœur tambour du sang s’engouffrant dans les veines; bruit assourdissant d’une respiration haletante. Elle avait jailli de sa mère comme une rebelle.

[The drumming of the heart; the blood throbbing through her veins; the thundering noise of heavy breathing. She sprang forth from her mother like a rebel].¹⁷

Tadjo, while writing a realistic portrait of a man and his family, is always looking for a language capable of mimicking the *intermittences du coeur*, the fitful heartbeat of a woman seeking after the truth. One reads something similar – in terms of style – in *À vol d’oiseau*, a book where poetry blends with prose, the sound confronts sense:

Il faut entendre la voix de ceux qui se taisent avec des mots qui sortent de la terre. Point de langage aseptisé, mais le tempo de la vie au galop, remodelant les images dépassées, les syntaxes usées, la pensée capitonnée.

[You should listen to those whose voices remain unheard although the wisdom they carry is shaped by their closeness to the earth. No refined language but the pace of life at a gallop refashions outmoded images, well-worn phrases, and ways of thinking that are out of date].¹⁸

Further in her quest, Nina runs into a strange book entitled *La sorcellerie et ses remèdes* [Witchcraft and its cures] that used to be the *livre de chevet*, the bedside book of the elderly Kouadio in his last days. It contains a list of treatments and prayers for diseases and problems of all sorts. Evidence that the old man was looking for consolation and help. He believed in traditional healing methods (among other worries was perhaps his vanishing sexual strength)¹⁹. Everyone living in sub-Saharan Africa has come across the fascinating – yet very unsettling – leaflets of fake doctors who promise

¹⁶ Ibid., 87.

¹⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹⁸ Tadjo 1992, 15; Tadjo 2001, 15 (the English translation is by Wangūi wa Goro).

¹⁹ Among his frustrations there is also the failure of his candidature for National Health minister.

to cure dozens of ‘diseases’, from impotence to unemployment (this was common in southern Europe too, decades ago). The book of prayers is a creation of Tadjò, who reworked an existing manual. It is a mixture of Catholicism and magic and explains how to fight “les attaques de sorcellerie”, the attacks of a witch doctor who wants us to die. Here is a short passage from a long list:

3 jours de prières-veillée de 22 heures à 5 heures; 3 jours de jeûne de 18 heures à 21 heures, avec intervalles de prières; 7 jours de prières-veillée de 22 heures à 5 heures; 7 jours de jeûne, avec intervalles de prières.

[3 days of praying and staying awake from 10 pm to 5 am; 3 days of fasting from 6 pm to 9 pm, with praying in between; 7 days of praying and staying awake from 10 pm to 5 am; 7 days of fasting, with praying in between]²⁰

Kouadio went to see a local *marabout*, a muslim healer, for advice. It was not, unfortunately, free and altruistic help. Nina discovers that her father spent a great amount of money indulging in his weakness, listening to what turned out to be a con man. Nina does not share her beloved father’s beliefs, but she tries her best not to judge him, even if she is shocked by his disavowing of knowledge acquired at school and at university. Nina looks for a physical reason for this intellectual decay:

Vers la fin de sa vie, le père avait restreint ses mouvements [...]. Il s’était progressivement détaché de tout ce qui se trouvait en dehors de son espace. Il vivait à l’intérieur de sa solitude peuplée par des regrets dont il était le seul à connaître la vraie nature.

[At the end of his life, her father restricted his movements [...]. Progressively he distanced himself from what was outside of his space. He lived in a solitude peopled with regrets, whose causes only he knew]²¹.

Nina had a special fascination for and aptitude in the natural sciences. The narrator refers to this passion from when she was just a teenager at school. For instance, she was interested in the mating habits of the praying mantis, the insect that kills her male during copulation. The passion for truth, even the most disturbing truth, is Nina’s destiny. Can we call this part of the book: Enlightenment against superstition? It is not so simple, because the journey back is a sort of self-therapy, and Nina through knowing her father’s life recognizes herself.

Dreams, both night and day dreams, are of special importance when the sentimental paths of motherhood and daughterhood meet. Nina is ready to embrace a new, delayed process of mourning. Her mother and she had lived not a symbiotic but a conflicting relationship. The writer uses a poetic, childlike way of describing their

²⁰ Tadjò 2010, 67-68.

²¹ Ibid., 55.

conflict, which we can interpret as an unconscious fear of being killed, possibly in a sort of cannibalistic rite:

Quand Nina constata que sa mère prenait enfin de l'âge, elle en ressentit un profond soulagement. Celle-ci ne pourrait plus la manger car celui lui prendrait trop de force, trop d'énergie. Et elle était maintenant affaiblie, préoccupée par le temps qui lui restait à vivre. Nina avait toujours su que c'était elle, et elle seule, que sa mère voulait avaler avant de partir. Mais Nina avait réussi à lui échapper.

[When Nina understood that her mother had at last begun to age, she felt a deep relief. She would not have been able to devour her anymore, because this would have demanded too much strength, too much energy. Now, her mother was weak, preoccupied with the time that was left to her. For a long time, Nina had known that her mother wanted to swallow her up before departing. But Nina had been able to escape from her]²².

After this chilling fantasy, Nina, remembering or perhaps describing another dream, recalls a Sunday on the beach. Nina and her sister were looking at their mother, an able swimmer, fighting with the waves of the ocean. Once again, fear and desire are inextricably united:

Brusquement, l'océan se mit à gronder, à noircir, on aurait dit la lave d'un volcan en éruption. Sa soeur sortit à la hâte. Nina la suivit. Quand elles se retournèrent, leur mère n'était plus là. Elles crièrent son nom. Rien. Elles crièrent encore, puis pleurèrent, recroquevillées sur elles-mêmes. Un attroupement avait commencé à se créer. Alors, elles virent leur mère émerger de l'eau, plus belle que jamais.

[Suddenly the ocean began to rumble, to turn black; it was like the lava of an erupting volcano. Her sister emerged in a hurry from the sea. Nina followed her. When they turned back, their mother was not there anymore. They cried out her name. Nothing. They cried out again, they started to weep, curling up their legs. A crowd began to gather. At that precise moment, they saw their mother coming out of the water, more beautiful than ever]²³.

The mother, as an unconquered demi-god, was still alive then (but in reality she is now dead). She could defeat the waves without losing her aloof charm. We come to understand that, during the process of mourning for her father, Nina is also coming to terms with her mother's legacy. "Loin de ma mère?", "Far from my mother?". In a certain way yes, because her family's heritage is indivisible. These are really powerful passages in which Tadjó is at her literary best, in the tradition of the most unforgiving pages of Albert Camus.

Tadjó has often written about the difficulties of being a mother, for instance in her novel *Reine Pokou. Concerto pour un sacrifice* (2004). It is a multi-faceted story of an

²² Ibid., 147.

²³ Ibid., 148.

eighteenth-century African queen named Pokou, from the Baoulé tribe of Ivory Coast. It is not really a historical chronicle, because Tadjó likes to blend reality and myth. As the subtitle shows, her slim and intriguing book is a *concert*, a musical and poetic commentary on the theme of sacrifice. Whose sacrifice and why? The myth, which the writer encounters for the first time as a child living in Abidjan²⁴, speaks of Pokou who, in an attempt to rescue her endangered people, decides, following the suggestion of a priest, to sacrifice her only child by throwing him into the river. It is well known that the idea of sacrificing the innocent is present almost everywhere in human cultures: from the children of Incas offered, far away in the highest mountains, to the gods right up to the biblical story of Isaac (the commemoration of a forbidden infanticide). But in her story, Tadjó does not end with a bloody version of the myth. As in Jorge Luis Borges' short story *Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* [Garden of the forking paths], different denouements are offered, because "tout est possible dans la légende, la belle parole fabriquée pour apaiser le peuple, lui redonner confiance en l'avenir" [everything is possible in a legend, a beautiful story invented to appease people, to renew their confidence in the future]²⁵. Tadjó wants to delve into the internal conflicts of a woman torn between her maternal instinct and her political duty:

Elle pleura. Finalement, elle se jeta à terre et se mit à rouler de gauche à droite en se tenant la tête entre les mains. D'un coup, elle arracha son pagne, dévoilant sa nudité aveuglante. Elle se tira les cheveux, se griffa la peau. Le sang coulait, se mêlant à la sueur et à la poussière.

[She cried. Finally, she threw herself on the ground and began to roll from left to right, holding her head in her hands. Suddenly she tore off her loincloth, displaying her glaring nakedness. She tore her hair, she scratched her skin. Blood started to flow, mingling with her sweat and the dust]²⁶.

This is a manifestation of deep mourning. We can speculate that between the Queen, who is fighting against her fate (in the book we find many clear references to modern civil wars in Africa), and Nina's mother (who unsuccessfully tried, as a young woman, to have an abortion) there are similarities. But the mother's sacrifice is different in nature. She dies before the catastrophe devours her adopted country: "Elle ne connut pas le signes de l'intolérance, le rejet de l'Autre. Elle ne connut pas le coup d'État, la peur, les remous et les gouvernements successifs" [She did not experience the rejection

²⁴ "La légende d'Abraha Pokou, reine baoulé, m'a été contée pour la première fois quand j'avais autour de dix ans. Je me souviens que l'histoire de cette femme sacrifiant son fils unique pour sauver son peuple avait frappé mon imagination de petite fille vivant à Abidjan. Je me représentais Pokou sous les traits d'une Madone noire" ["The legend of Abraha Pokou, Baoulé Queen, was told to me for the first time when I was around ten. I remember that the story of this woman who sacrificed her only child to save her people struck my imagination as a child living in Abidjan. I thought of Pokou as someone with the features of a black Madonna"]: Tadjó 2004, 7.

²⁵ Ibid., 82.

²⁶ Ibid., 45.

of the Other. She did not experience the coup d'état, the turmoil and the new governments]²⁷. The passions that stormed her life are over and Nina finds relief in remembering her mother's everyday life, when she enjoyed gardening in her small villa. Once again, the metaphor of the growing trees has a heuristic meaning, but this time not referring to puzzling lies but to the mysteries of memory:

Les arbres sont porteurs de notre mémoire. Et pourtant ils se taisent, gardent jalousement leurs secrets. Je ne saurai jamais ce qui s'est réellement passé.

[Trees carry memories. Yet they are silent, jealously keeping their secrets. I will never know what actually happened]²⁸.

Tadjo, uses a familiar French, not *collet monté* (stiff). However, the process of recognizing what (perhaps) is true, is a painful one. Several years before Tadjo wrote in a poem: “La racine des pierres / plonge très loin dans l’oubli / elle se gave des mémoires / que la terre rejette”, “The roots of stones / sink deep into oblivion / gulping down those memories / that the soil rejects”²⁹. Is this the evocation of a burial? or of life springing from the earth? This dialectical movement is characteristic of Tadjo's imagination. Let us compare this with an early love poem of hers (from *Latérite*):

Je poserai mes mains
 Sur ton front or-ivoire
 Et sourirai en toi
 Des sourires d'enfant
 Mais il faut
 Que tu ailles
 Là où les champs sont mûrs
 Il faut
 Que tu repartes
 Sur le chemin des dieux
 Car tu es homme
 À faire jaillir les sources.

[Let me put my hands
 On your ivory-gold brow
 And smile for you
 The smiles of a child
 But
 You must go

²⁷ Tadjo, 2010, 138.

²⁸ Ibid., 141.

²⁹ I quote these lines of *À mi-chemin* from: Chevrier 2007, 190.

Where fields are ripe
 You must
 Leave again
 On the path of the gods
 For you are the man
 To make the springs gush forth]³⁰.

Once again the elementary life of Nature has been brought back to the circularity of beginning and end. *Loin de mon père* effects a closure in a very simple way, by adhering to chronology: the Catholic funeral mass (no healers or *marabouts* around), the reading from the Gospel of John (Lazarus rising from the grave), the burial. And just before the coffin descends into the grave, we read Nina's last poetical epiphany, a vision of a small-scale funeral:

Entre deux racines, elle vit une colonne de fourmis ouvrières transportant un papillon renversé sur le dos. Elles se déplaçaient en parfait accord.

[Between two tree-roots she saw a column of worker ants carrying a butterfly in its back. They moved in perfect harmony]³¹.

Writers are tempted by memory as well as by forgetting. Nina is sure that she won't forget her father ("elle pensa qu'elle l'aimerait toujours", 'She thought she was going to love him forever')³². It is her personal mourning, her resolution of happiness: the journey of memory has just begun.

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³⁰ Tadjó, 2006, 84 (English translation by Peter S. Thompson; the poems were originally published in 1984).

³¹ Tadjó 2010, 189.

³² *Ibid.*: this is the novel's last sentence.

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ALEXANDER ETKIND

STORICISMO MAGICO¹

Strane creature popolano la letteratura russa post-sovietica. Ci sono storie su lupi mannari e volpi mannare (*Svjaščennaja kniga oborotnja* [Il libro sacro del lupo mannaro] di Pelevin); su settari che copulano con il terreno, bio-filologi che clonano i grandi scrittori russi con l'essenza dell'immortalità (*Goluboe salo* [Lardo azzurro] di Vladimir Sorokin); sulla crisi futura e la guerra civile in Russia, che ripresenterà le antiche tribù e le fiabe di Kiev e di Mosca (*ZhD* [FS] di Dmitrij Bykov); su un dittatore russo di origini russo-cinesi, il cui maestro, un Vecchio Credente tradizionalista, lo istruisce citando Sigmund Freud (*Ukus angela* [Il morso dell'angelo] di Pavel Krusanov); sulla antica tribù finlandese, Meria, che è sopravvissuta come una specie di comunità spirituale tra i russi contemporanei e ha preservato i riti sessuali e funerari più bizzarri (*Ovsjanki* [Zigoli] di Denis Osokin); e su vampiri sotto false spoglie che governano i russi in segreto, succhiando loro il sangue e decidendo il corso della loro storia (i romanzi multipli di Sergej Luk'janenko su "guardie" mistiche, *Empire V* di Viktor Pelevin). Questi diavoli post-sovietici paiono più reali, e persino più frequenti, dei loro predecessori nelle letterature russa e sovietica classiche; ma in contrasto con l'inesauribile interesse nei confronti del gotico tipico delle lettere russe ed europee, i critici e gli studiosi hanno mostrato scarso interesse per la letteratura del perturbante post-sovietico.

Il magico letterario, così bizzarro, che anima la narrativa post-sovietica è palesemente diverso dai generi gotici, fantascientifici, o *fantasy* di ambito occidentale o Anglo-americano. Le differenze sono molte, ma le più importanti riguardano il centro di vero interesse, che in questo genere post-sovietico, si localizza su congetture storiche bizzarre piuttosto che su creature magiche e strane. Qualsiasi elemento gli autori post-sovietici proiettino nel passato o nel futuro, il loro scopo usuale è la comprensione del trauma essenziale, o piuttosto della catastrofe, del periodo sovietico.

Nel ventunesimo secolo le politiche imperialiste russe – revisioniste al di fuori del paese, tradizionaliste e repressive all'interno – mostrarono scarso rinascimento per i

¹ Per gentile concessione dell'autore, pubblichiamo questo saggio nella traduzione di Giuliana Ferreccio.

milioni che perirono sotto il terrore sovietico. Tuttavia, la cultura post-sovietica ha prodotto forme di memoria e di protesta inusuali, forse anche distorte o perverse. Due processi si uniscono in tale fase del lutto post-catastrofe: lo straniamento del passato e il ritorno del rimosso. Riportando alla luce il passato sepolto nel presente, lo studioso della cultura post-catastrofica osserva che la memoria si trasforma in immaginazione. Ciò che intendo dire è che il desiderio di ripresentare il passato catastrofico appartiene alla melanconia, piuttosto che alla nostalgia. Freud, come si sa, contrappose la prima a un “lutto sano”, spiegando che la logica della melanconia si basa sulla confusione fra il passato e il presente, sulla ripetizione ossessiva della perdita, e sull’interruzione del rapporto con il presente. “L’inibizione del melanconico ci pare sconcertante perché non riusciamo a vedere che cosa lo assorba così interamente”, Freud scrive.² La dialettica di ripetizione e straniamento produce un campo di immagini che assorbe la melanconica soggettività post-sovietica.

Dopo due decenni di riforme continue, e dopo i riconosciuti fallimenti di tali riforme, la Russia è ancora post-sovietica. Questo termine appare sempre più come un eufemismo voluto, usato sia dagli interessati che dagli osservatori per nascondere la novità del putinismo. È vero, peraltro, che non c’è stata alcuna definizione in positivo per queste nuove identità culturali e aspirazioni politiche post-sovietiche. Per questa ragione così tanti testi culturali di quel paese si rivolgono a questioni di memoria, lutto, espiazione. Spesso tali romanzi non ci parlano del dovere della memoria (l’obbligo morale per la gente che vive in un tempo migliore di ricordare gli orrori del passato), quanto piuttosto dell’opposto: del potere penetrante del passato, della natura fantasmatica e ossessionante del presente e dell’impossibilità di emancipare l’una dall’altro, il presente dal passato. Nel romanzo di Aleksej Ivanov sulla “classe creativa” moscovita, *Kom’juniti* (Community), la giovane protagonista femminile produce una frase misteriosa che funziona come un leitmotiv: “Siamo mesti, addolorati, luttuosi, ma non sciocchi”³ In altre parole, siamo in lutto ma ciò non vuol dire che desideriamo esserne disorientati. Siamo in lutto e spesso non sappiamo esattamente per che cosa; il romanzo nutre il lutto post-sovietico di immagini medievali della “Morte Nera”, la peste bubbonica. Tuttavia dobbiamo ancora vivere nel mondo reale, il mondo del presente, perciò non abusate della nostra espiazione per vostro beneficio: non siamo sciocchi. Tradotto nei termini di Freud, questa posizione si fa tecnica: siamo in lutto, ma non melanconici. Il fatto che il romanzo attribuisca questo pensiero complesso a un’eroina ingenua, che continua a ripeterlo come una sorta di tic verbale, sottolinea la natura generica di tale sentimento.

² Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, in Id., *Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis – Beyond the Pleasure Principle, the Ego and the Id, and Other Works*. The Pelican Freud Library, trans. James Strachey, vol. 11 (New York: Penguin, 1984), 245-68.

³ “My skorbiasčie no my ne lochi” (Aleksej Ivanov. *Kom’juniti*. Moskva: Azbuka 2012.)

Benché la creatività del romanzo russo sembri irrefrenabile non è perciò priva di significato. Molti dei suoi temi più di successo si sovrappongono. Sembrano mostrare un interesse prevalente per due aree dell'esperienza umana, la religione e la storia, che essi combinano in modi variegati e scioccanti. Peraltro, non si occupano per nulla di aree di tradizionalmente legate alla letteratura, come la psicologia o l'analisi realistica dei problemi sociali. Non analizzano il presente in un modo che sembri "realistico" al lettore; piuttosto, per contestualizzare il presente scavano nel passato, oppure costruiscono un futuro che somiglia in modo spaventoso al passato. Queste finzioni usano uno sfoggio di congegni, personaggi e allusioni magici. In effetti, la magia è il contesto più prossimo e più ricco per tali romanzi. Basandosi su tale chiave interpretativa, nel decennio recente alcuni autori hanno pensato che il concetto di Realismo Magico si potesse applicare alle letterature dell'est europeo che si sono recentemente emancipate dal dominio russo; esempi di tale connessione comprendono generalmente le opere di scrittori non russi – ucraini, kirghisi, georgiani, abchasi.⁴

Coniato nella Germania di Weimar e applicato alla narrativa latino-americana, poi a quella africana, il concetto di Realismo Magico compì un cerchio quasi completo quando arrivò nello spazio post-sovietico.⁵ Può, tuttavia, il "Realismo Magico" catturare la peculiarità della narrativa post-sovietica? Salman Rushdie descrisse il Realismo Magico come "la commistione dell'improbabile e dell'ordinario".⁶ Per quanto improbabili, i romanzi di Sorokin, Šarov, Pelevin non contengono molto che possa plausibilmente essere considerato ordinario. Contengono molta magia, è vero, ma descriverli come realistici sarebbe sbagliato. Un'attenzione comune per il passato radicalmente trasformato, ma ancora riconoscibile come storico – si aggiunge alla peculiarità di tale letteratura.

Io credo che si tratti di un nuovo genere, simile al Realismo Magico e, insieme, diverso. La somiglianza deriva dal fatto che entrambi i generi fanno un ampio uso di magia in costruzioni romanzesche di vasta scala. Essi presentano anche una critica implicita della società contemporanea, basata su una profonda revisione dei fondamenti storici. Tuttavia, questi romanzi post-sovietici si distanziano consapevolmente dalle tradizioni del romanzo realista che sono fondamentali per il Realismo Magico. Il romanzo post-sovietico non emula la realtà sociale né compete con il romanzo psicologico; ciò che emula, e con la quale si scontra, è la storia. Questa differenza è

⁴ Vedi Erika Haber, *The Myth of the Non-Russian. Iskander and Aitmatov's Magical Universe* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), e Vitaly Chernetsky, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures. Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

⁵ Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments. Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004); vedi anche Jean-Pierre Durix, *Mimesis, Genres, and Post-Colonial Discourse. Deconstructing Magical Realism* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Picador 1982), 9.

importante. Per darvi credito, ho coniato il termine Storicismo Magico, che definisce bene l'immaginario che si è sviluppato dalla cultura post-catastrofe e post-sovietica.

La storia e la magia sono strani alleati; peraltro, fantasmi, vampiri, lupi mannari e altre bestie simili aiutano gli umani a discutere sulla loro storia, quando non sia comprensibile con altri mezzi. Lo scenario perturbante della letteratura post-sovietica segnala il fallimento di altri modi, più convenzionali, di comprendere la realtà sociale. Non è la chiarezza acuta della critica sociale e culturale ad attrarre i lettori, ma l'inesauribile fantasia di chi crea passati alternativi. Nelle visioni melanconiche di Šarov, Sorokin e i loro colleghi, il passato è percepito non soltanto come "un altro paese" ma come un paese esotico e inesplorato, ancora gravido di alternative non nate e di miracoli imminenti. Si può sostenere che l'uso esteso del congiuntivo caratterizzi i periodi post-rivoluzionari. Il senso della perdita dà luogo a domande su cosa avrebbe potuto essere.⁷ Ossessionati dal passato e incapaci di sottrarsi alla sua contemplazione ripetitiva, gli scrittori post-sovietici si trovano intrappolati in uno stato di melanconia. Celebrando una spinta consumistica senza precedenti, i loro lettori sentono la perdita delle opportunità politiche di cui avevano goduto recentemente. In un contributo ad una patinata rivista per uomini, il critico della cultura Grigorij Revzin descrisse la situazione in termini politici anziché clinici. "Il passato non conosce il congiuntivo soltanto se lo conosce il presente [...] Se il presente è ciò che non si può affatto cambiare, il passato diventa ciò che si può cambiare in qualsiasi modo possibile".⁸ Quando la politica non procura alternative, la storiografia ne offre in abbondanza. I fantasmi portano giustizia quando i tribunali reali negano ogni speranza; similmente, le allegorie fioriscono quando altri modi di costruire la verità e la memoria tradiscono il narratore. Combinando un passato catastrofico, un presente patetico e un futuro pericoloso, la Russia dei primi anni del ventunesimo secolo è una serra per i fantasmi, *revenant*, e altri corpi fantasmatici.

I concetti gemelli di realtà ubriaca e osservatore sobrio, inventati da Michael Wood ci aiutano a capire queste fantasie. Scrivendo sul Realismo Magico, Wood distingue fra due filoni, uno che è magico nel materiale e realista nello stile ("come se l'autore stesse recitando un elenco telefonico"), e un altro che è realista nel materiale e magico nello stile ("i fatti [...] ci sono presentati come se fossero favole"). Wood sembra per lo più interessato al primo tipo di narrazioni che, sostiene, sono scritte come se il cronista fosse sobrio e la realtà ubriaca.⁹ I famosi esempi latino-americani come *Cent'anni di solitudine*, appartengono chiaramente al primo tipo di realismo magico, decostruiscono le storiografie nazionali raccontando le storie fantastiche del passato imparzialmente,

⁷ Vedi Peter Fritzsche. *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 203.

⁸ Grigorij Revzin, "O Caricynskom dvorce i Jurii Lužkove", <http://www.gq.ru/exclusive/columnists/152/44235/> (ultimo accesso 15 maggio 2009).

⁹ Michael Wood, "In Reality", *Janus Head*, 5, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 9-14.

come se la storia fosse ubriaca e lo storico sobrio. Ingaggiando la magia popolare e moltiplicandone l'uso nei modi più sfrenati, queste storie disconoscono le narrazioni ufficiali, che presentano la sofferenza popolare come un sacrificio necessario e giustificabile per il bene presente del popolo. Proiettando la magia all'interno della storia, questi romanzi sovvertono i discorsi della storiografia accademica e la loro attenzione per le scelte razionali e le forze sociali. Essi tendono a seguire alcune delle convenzioni stilistiche della scrittura storiografica, come l'imparzialità e ciò che Wood puntualmente definisce sobrietà. Raramente i narratori di tali romanzi mettono in scena i giochi che Nabokov fa con i propri lettori, rendendo reale la presenza del narratore nel corso dell'azione. Incoraggiano i lettori a comprendere il carattere relazionale e costruito della realtà narrata con esperimenti genealogici anziché narratologici.

È qui che la narrativa russa post-sovietica converge con quella post-coloniale latino-americana.¹⁰ In realtà non c'è confine fra il passato e il presente; ciò che si dà con ancor maggiore insistenza nell'ambito della magia. Similmente, il confine fra Realismo Magico e Storicismo Magico, è una questione di focalizzazione o di sottolineatura piuttosto che di definizioni e confini. In fondo, la popolarità dello Storicismo Magico fra gli scrittori e i lettori post-sovietici realizza il "compromesso grazie al quale il controllo sulla realtà si svolge in modo frammentario" che Freud attribuisce alla melanconia.¹¹ Psicologicamente, l'incapacità di differenziarsi dall'oggetto perduto impedisce all'individuo di vivere nel presente, lo allontana dall'amore e dal lavoro. Politicamente, l'opposto è probabilmente altrettanto importante: quando non c'è scelta nel presente, il passato storico si sviluppa in una narrativa ciclica che oscura il presente anziché spiegarlo. Poeticamente, l'osservazione di Freud sul carattere frammentario del compromesso melanconico con la realtà fornisce una prospettiva istruttiva sulla natura della scrittura post-catastrofica. La letteratura ha una licenza mistica che non viene riconosciuta in altri ambiti dell'esperienza umana, come la religione, la politica, o la "vita reale":

Noi adattiamo i nostri giudizi alle condizioni poste dalla realtà finzionale dello scrittore e trattiamo le anime, gli spiriti e i fantasmi come se avessero completo diritto di esistere nella nostra realtà materiale [...] Ciò che ha un effetto perturbante nella vita reale ce l'ha anche in letteratura. Lo scrittore, però, può intensificare e moltiplicare questo effetto molto al di là di ciò che è alla portata dell'esperienza normale.¹²

¹⁰ Per il riconoscimento dell'influsso degli scrittori latino-americani "Magico-realisti" sugli autori russi dei periodi tardo sovietici o post-sovietici, vedi Sergji Čuprinin, "Ešče raz k voprosu o kartografii vymysla," *Znamja*, 11 (2006).

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 253.

¹² Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" in Id., *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), 157-8.

Costruzioni allegoriche dell'anacronistico, del perturbante e del mostruoso sono metonimiche, assumono la parte per il tutto, *pars pro toto*, e le uniscono in combinazioni creative. Producendo una propria gamma di reazioni del lettore, questa convenzione retorica differisce da una più tradizionale poetica metaforica, che paragona ambiti lontani l'uno dall'altro senza dissezionarli, concentrandosi sulle parti e mescolandole. Certamente, questo lutto semi-consapevole, misterioso e spaventoso, è diverso dalla testimonianza fattuale e legittima di Solženicyn sul passato sovietico, suffragata dai resoconti. Queste versioni del lutto sono entrambe mimetiche, ma la differenza che le separa può essere paragonata alla differenza che passa tra un film documentario, che rappresenta una catastrofe cercando di ricostruire i fatti, le proporzioni e le cause, e un film dell'orrore, che ri-presenta la catastrofe, distorcendone tutti i tratti, ma rendendo effettivo il suo tratto più importante, l'orrore.¹³

Spesso queste storie presentano manipolazioni del corpo umano che concedono un calore metafisico e un'immediatezza di contatto fra i manipolati; grazie a questo modo particolare di comunicazione la comunità immaginaria di super-post-sovietici supera il peso della storia. Dopo esser stati schiacciati dal ghiaccio, i settari di Sorokin possono parlarsi a vicenda, con il cuore. Dopo esser stati morsi da un vampiro, i personaggi di Pelevin comprendono le altre creature, umane o vampiriche, mordendole. I personaggi di Šarov acquisiscono simili poteri di comprensione e resurrezione dopo aver avuto rapporti sessuali con Madame de Staël. Nella condizione post-sovietica la fantasia anti-moderna di una comunicazione immediata ed extra-linguistica diventa un rifugio comune e amato. In molte fantasie la conoscenza sovranaturale conduce a un potere illimitato. Tuttavia, molte di queste storie sono più specifiche: sono fantasie sulle super-comunità, non sui superuomini.

Già nei primi anni ottanta Viktor Pelevin teorizzava questo genere letterario, che era emerso nei suoi stessi scritti. Nel suo saggio giovanile, "Zombifikacija. Opyt sravnitel'nogo antropologii" [Zombificazione. Saggio di antropologia comparata] Pelevin interpretava l'intera esperienza sovietica come una zombificazione e la sua prossima trasformazione come il secondo avvento degli zombi sepolti. Basando le sue idee sulle letture dell'antropologo americano Wade Davis (1985), che lavorò sugli zombi di Haiti, Pelevin descrive il modo in cui alcune società segrete trasformarono gli umani in zombi seppellendoli e disseppellendoli il giorno dopo, vendendoli poi come braccianti ai padroni di piantagioni. Quelli che vissero nel periodo sovietico attraversarono qualcosa di simile, ipotizza Pelevin, descrivendo una persona che, "dopo

¹³ Dal punto di vista analitico, questa differenza si avvicina alla distinzione fra "passaggio all'atto" e "elaborazione" del trauma, come lo descrive La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 141. In questo senso, gli studi culturali sui film dell'orrore sono istruttivi: Paul Coates, *The Gorgon's Gaze. German Cinema, Expressionism, and the Image of Horror*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991); Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation. Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

aver letto alcuni opuscoli”, tenta di iniziare una *perestrojka* in una tipica città sovietica. Inaspettatamente, il mancato riformatore cade “in un pozzo incomprensibile. Laggiù, tutto attorno, ci sono registri a metà marciti, scheletri di cavalli e di umani, pezzi di ceramica e metallo danneggiato. Si trova in una tomba”. Così, secondo Pelevin, un individuo post-sovietico paradigmatico è uno zombi che ritorna alla tomba da cui è venuto, e lo stesso vale per gli scrittori: “molti zombi erano membri dell’Unione degli Scrittori Sovietici e perciò gli zombi erano descritti sia dall’interno che dall’esterno”.¹⁴ A livello retorico, questo campo di immagini esemplifica la prosopopea, un tropo classico che permette agli autori di parlare per i morti dando voce a “un’entità assente, deceduta o senza voce”.¹⁵ Nel revival post-sovietico di questa tradizione arcaica, queste voci finzionali, ma indispensabili, sono date in prestito a zombi, vampiri, *revenant*, ibridi e mostri.

Mentre la Russia si avvicinava alla crisi degli anni Dieci, osservai manifestazioni peculiari del modo magico-storico di comprendere la realtà contemporanea, non soltanto nella narrativa post-sovietica, ma anche nell’ambito della non-narrativa. Permettetemi di dividere con voi alcune brevi osservazioni sul tipo curioso di genere non-narrativo che alti funzionari, o persone a loro molto vicine, scrivono in questo periodo di disperazione. Alla fine del 2010 il presidente della Corte Costituzionale della Federazione Russa, Valerij Zor’kin, pubblicò il saggio, “La Costituzione e il crimine” su un giornale ufficiale della Federazione Russa. Sorprendentemente, nel formulare il suo avvertimento contro la criminalizzazione crescente della vita in Russia, Zor’kin scelse non il linguaggio della Costituzione, ma il linguaggio di Pelevin, tratto da *Empire V*:

In uno stato criminale i nostri cittadini si divideranno in predatori, che si troveranno molto liberi nelle giungle criminali, e in subumani, che capiranno di essere nient’altro che cibo per i predatori. I predatori saranno una minoranza, le “bistecche” che passeggiano fra la maggioranza. Lo scarto fra i primi e i secondi si espanderà costantemente.¹⁶

Partendo dal linguaggio di Pelevin, Zor’kin scavò ancora più a fondo in quello di Puškin: usò una citazione tratta da versi ironici del 1823 per descrivere l’atteggiamento, post-sovietico, dei forti e potenti nei confronti dei deboli e degli oppressi: “dovrebbero essere o massacrati o privati di tutto”, il giudice cita con amarezza. Ipotizzò, inoltre, che queste “bistecche viaggianti”, o una gran parte dei russi, desiderano l’arrivo di un “salvatore” che può soltanto prendere la forma di un dittatore o di un super-predatore. Questa non è un’anti-utopia, sosteneva Zor’kin, ma uno “scenario negativo”. È

¹⁴ Viktor Pelevin, “Zombifikacija”, *Den’ i noč’* (Krasnojarsk), 4 (1994); ripubblicato in Id., *Relics. Rannee i neizdannoe* (Moskva: Eksmo, 2005), 297-334.

¹⁵ Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement”, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 76.

¹⁶ Valerij Zor’kin, “Konstitucija protiv kriminala”, *Rossijsakija gazeta*, 10 dicembre 2010, <http://www.rg.ru/2010/12/10/zorkin.html> (ultimo accesso 13 gennaio 2012).

istruttivo constatare che, mentre noi studiosi di letteratura ci tormentiamo nel dubbio se il nostro linguaggio troppo delicato non sia adatto a descrivere fenomeni legali o politici, l'avvocato più importante della Federazione Russa usava esattamente questo linguaggio.

Nel mezzo di questo “scenario negativo”, con la loro attenzione per la storia, i romanzi post-sovietici hanno avuto storici come protagonisti centrali; questi storici, peraltro, si mettono a delirare in un modo che li rende molto simili agli zombi di Pelevin. Nel romanzo *Opravdanie* (Giustificazione, 2001) Dmitrij Bykov presenta il giovane storico moscovita, Rogov, il nipote di una vittima che fu arrestata nel 1938. Ossessionato dal nonno che non conobbe mai, Rogov sviluppa una teoria ingenua sullo stalinismo. Quelle “repressioni” non potevano essere “ingiustificate”; devono aver avuto un significato che si possa interpretare. Rogov teorizza che le persone fossero sottoposte a una sofferenza insopportabile perché si potessero scegliere quei pochi che sarebbero stati adatti a sopravvivere. Quelli che si arrendevano sotto tortura e confessavano crimini inventati tradivano Stalin, perciò dovevano morire; quelli che resistevano fino alla fine erano salvati segretamente, curati e addestrati.¹⁷ In quanto agenti segreti e dirigenti, queste persone cambiarono il corso della Seconda Guerra Mondiale e della guerra fredda, pensa Rogov. Ispirato da questa teoria, fa un viaggio in Siberia nella speranza di trovare il nonno ancora vivo e residente in una riserva segreta di stile sovietico. Durante il viaggio Rogov scopre una comunità clandestina di settari religiosi e un luogo di villeggiatura sadomaschistico dove i nuovi russi torturano i loro pari per puro piacere. Infine, Rogov si annega in una zona paludosa della Siberia.

Opravdanie toccò un nervo scoperto della memoria post-sovietica. Creando una connessione diretta fra nipoti e nonni la famiglia romanzesca post-sovietica rende irrilevante l'ultima generazione sovietica.¹⁸ C'è qui anche una preferenza per la storia lontana rispetto al passato immediato, una preferenza che osserveremo nelle opere migliori della letteratura post-sovietica, come *Repeticii* (Prove, 1992) di Šarov e *Led* (Ghiaccio, 2002) di Sorokin. Mentre il passato sovietico immediato viene visto come grigio e fiacco, i periodi precedenti della storia russa sono pieni di meraviglie; anche se questi periodi – rivoluzione, impero e persino i tempi medievali di torbidi e violenza – sono visti come responsabili della catastrofe sovietica; l'immaginazione creativa degli scrittori post-sovietici si trova a proprio agio in questi periodi. Ad Andrej Bitov va il

¹⁷ La logica della tortura di Bykov differisce da una versione più nota formulata di Arthur Koestler nel suo *Darkness at Noon* (1940). In Koestler la tortura convince il seguace fedele che il partito in realtà vuole la sua confessione come sacrificio ulteriore per la causa.

¹⁸ Questa costruzione sviluppa le riflessioni russe più note sulle “generazioni letterarie” che fu inventata da Viktor Šklovskij nel suo *O teorii prozy* (Moskva: Krug, 1925). Come in questo modello genealogico, i personaggi di Bitov e di Bykov rifiutano i predecessori immediati in favore di antenati più lontani. In un'interpretazione simile lo scrittore ungherese Péter Esterházy, nel romanzo *Javitott kiadás. Melléklet a Harmonia coelestishez* (Budapest: Magvető, 2002), racconta la storia di un figlio che trova in archivio la prova che il suo amato padre era un agente segreto che denunciò gli amici e persino la moglie

merito di aver inventato questo motivo; nel suo romanzo pre-post-sovietico *Puškinskij Dom* (*La casa di Puškin*) (completato nel 1978, pubblicato nel 1987) Odoevcev, un giovane storico della letteratura, vuole cancellare l'esperienza sovietica rifiutando suo padre, un patetico funzionario, venerando invece suo nonno, sopravvissuto del Gulag e studioso del romanticismo ottocentesco. Al contrario di Rogov che nacque troppo tardi, Odoevcev trova in effetti suo nonno, benché il reduce offeso mostri ben poco interesse per suo nipote (capitolo terzo). Entrambi i romanzi interrogano la storia sovietica come parte integrante di una ricerca disperata del suo senso. È significativo che i personaggi centrali dei romanzi siano storici, professionisti della memoria. Odoevcev sopravvive all'alcolismo diventando uno studioso affermato (anche lui del romanticismo) nell'Accademia Sovietica delle Scienze; Rogov si suicida. Paragonando questi testi si nota che il dolore della memoria nella ricerca dei nonni perduti non si è molto alleviato negli ultimi trent'anni. Possiamo tuttavia notare che l'attenzione si focalizza: negli anni settanta Odoevcev si rivolgeva alla poesia di metà Ottocento, a qualcosa che era chiaramente irrilevante per la vita di suo nonno o per la propria; negli anni 2000 Rogov si concentra sullo stalinismo, che ognuno – il protagonista, l'autore, il lettore – identifica come la fonte della propria eredità di sofferenza.

Un percorso genealogico più profondo, offerto dallo Storicismo Magico, ci porta alla prosa dello scrittore e storico dissidente Andrej Sinjavskij. Nel suo scandaloso *Progulki s Puškinym* (*Passeggiate con Puškin*), che fu scritto mentre scontava la pena in un campo sovietico, Sinjavskij presentò nelle vesti di un vampiro lo scrittore romantico russo per eccellenza, Aleksander Puškin. C'è una via diretta che porta dall'immagine vampiristica di Puškin, creata da Sinjavskij, ai romanzi vampiristici di Viktor Pelevin, il quale, come Sinjavskij, sperimentò a sua volta, unendo il processo creativo con l'eroticismo e il vampirismo, quarant'anni dopo. Benché quasi nessuno scrittore della generazione post-sovietica abbia fatto l'esperienza di vivere dalla parte sbagliata del fino spinato, questa stessa generazione ha riempito lo spazio letterario di una moltitudine di creature persecutorie e luttuose – fantasmi, mostri, ibridi, cloni.¹⁹ Come predisse il sopravvissuto del Gulag, Varlam Šalamov, la generazione di scrittori che non ha mai vissuto i campi di persona si è via via sempre più immersa nel "grottesco". In un recente articolo di critica letteraria Dmitrij Bykov ha fatto risalire la genealogia di autori post-sovietici non a Šalamov o Solženicsyn, ma a Sinjavskij.²⁰

¹⁹ Sulla continuità "inconscia" fra Sinjavskij e Pelevin, vedi Dmitrij Bykov, "Terc i synov'ja", *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 15 (Winter 2006), <http://sites.utoronto.ca/tsq/15/bykov15.shtml> (ultimo accesso 12 gennaio 2012); vedi anche Alexander Etkind, Mark Lipovetsky "The Salamander's Return: The Soviet Catastrophe and the Post-Soviet Novel", *Russian Studies in Literature* 46:4 (Fall 2010).

²⁰ Bykov, "Terc i synov'ja".

Repeticii di Vladimir Šarov

Come esempio paradigmatico di Storicismo Magico scelgo fra le opere di Vladimir Šarov, autore di otto romanzi, e storico professionista. Nel suo primo romanzo, *Repeticii*, il narratore è uno storico che lavora a Tomsk, in Siberia, nel 1965. L'argomento della sua dissertazione è lo scisma della chiesa russa nel diciassettesimo secolo (Šarov stesso discusse la sua dissertazione su un periodo appena precedente, il Periodo dei Torbidi). Capiamo, da varie indicazioni, che ciò che stiamo leggendo è una dissertazione finzionale, perché naturalmente non poteva esserci alcuna possibilità che il narratore potesse discutere il proprio lavoro nell'Unione Sovietica del 1965, o anche molto dopo. Da un suo amico, sopravvissuto al Gulag, il narratore viene in possesso di un manoscritto, redatto nel diciassettesimo secolo dal fondatore di una setta misteriosa. L'autore si rivela essere un regista teatrale francese, Jacques de Certan. Catturato da truppe russe in Livonia, Certan visse alla corte dello zar Aleksei e lavorò con il Patriarca Nikon nel suo monastero. Documentò i suoi viaggi russi in lingua bretone e il narratore traduce e aggiorna la storia di Certan nella forma del libro di cui è protagonista. L'azione inizia nella Nuova Gerusalemme, una copia amatoriale della Terra Santa che Nikon costruì nella campagna vicino a Mosca. Nikon rinominò ogni fiume e ogni villaggio secondo gli originali palestinesi e costruì chiese come copie dei modelli di Gerusalemme; iniziata nel 1658, la Cattedrale della Resurrezione fu eretta come una replica a grandezza naturale del Santo Sepolcro a Gerusalemme, costruito nel luogo dove Gesù trovò la sua fine. Nel periodo sovietico, c'era laggiù un campo di lavoro che si chiamava anch'esso Nuova Gerusalemme; Solženicyn passò molti mesi in quel campo, dopo il suo arresto nel 1945. Il monastero fu riaperto nel 1994, e molti pellegrini e turisti hanno visitato da allora la Gerusalemme di Nikon (e di Solženicyn) sulle rive del fiume Istra.

Šarov basa la sua storia della nuova Gerusalemme su fatti appurati, ma il narratore se ne allontana in parte. Veniamo a sapere che, mentre costruiva la sua Terra Santa, Nikon chiese a Certan di mettere in scena un'intera sacra rappresentazione, un mistero, una rappresentazione delle parole e della passione di Cristo e di tutto ciò che viene descritto nel quattro Vangeli, più alcuni brani apocrifi. Tutti, tranne Cristo, dovevano essere descritti nelle prove per tali rappresentazioni, poiché il *mysterium* aveva lo scopo di far accadere il Secondo Avvento, facendo sì che Cristo si presentasse come il Messia in persona. In seguito, Nikon cade in disgrazia, ciò che effettivamente avvenne nel 1666, e le centinaia di contadini che avevano preso parte alle prove delle sacre rappresentazioni vengono esiliati in Siberia. Certan muore per la strada, ma i suoi attori rimangono fedeli ai suoi insegnamenti, formano una comunità settaria e continuano le prove nella speranza dell'imminente venuta di Cristo. Circondati da paludi siberiane essi continuano ripetere le prove per generazioni, ma poi qualcosa di imprevisto accade. Scoppia una lite fra quelli che fanno la parte dei cristiani in queste scene dai Vangeli e quelli che fanno la parte degli ebrei. Il conflitto cresce fino al punto in cui gli uni

iniziano a sterminare gli altri; a quel punto si è già fondato un Gulag nel villaggio. Gli apostoli di prima diventano poi i comandanti del campo e continuano le loro prove usandole come mezzo per fare propaganda ateistica. Il solo ebreo che sopravvive a questo Olocausto, un ragazzino, è colui che fornisce al narratore il manoscritto di Certan. Il nonno e la nonna di Šarov scomparvero nel corso del terrore staliniano e lui ricorda suo padre, anch'egli scrittore, come un "uomo molto triste".²¹ Nonostante la carriera universitaria, Šarov è convinto che la sua vera università sia stata la sua esperienza di bambino nei tardi anni Cinquanta, quando amici e colleghi del padre ritornavano dai campi e raccontavano le loro storie.²² [...]

Repeticii di Šarov presenta la meravigliosa storia *fantasy* di una comunità settaria che si estende dal Diciassettesimo secolo agli ultimi anni del Ventesimo. Storico di formazione, l'autore così descrisse le fonti della sua immaginazione: "La storia che imparai non è storia degli umani. Era la storia di ettari, raccolti, flussi finanziari [...]. Mi era completamente estranea [...]. Cerco ora di capire cosa fosse la rivoluzione [...]. Perché le persone che avevano sogni meravigliosi commisero crimini mostruosi."²³ [...]

L'ultimo romanzo di Šarov, *Bud'te kak deti* (Siate come bambini, 2009) presenta un ampio panorama della rivoluzione del 1917. Come chiavi per capire questo avvenimento, Šarov presenta la Crociata dei Bambini del tredicesimo secolo e le speranze millenaristiche condivise dalle sette russe medievali e da quelle moderne. "La rivoluzione del 1917 era attesa con passione da un numero enorme di persone molto differenti fra loro, da partiti e da gruppi religiosi", sostiene Šarov, e la lista di questi gruppi inizia con i Vecchi Credenti e i settari.²⁴ Nel suo romanzo un gruppo impressionante di personaggi, dagli sciamani siberiani ai leader bolscevichi, mettono in scena questo impulso millenario, ognuno in modo diverso. La scrittura dolce e melanconica di Šarov si combina con una sfrenata, ma coerente, fantasia storica, in un modo particolare che gli studiosi di letteratura non hanno ancora indagato a fondo.

Led di Vladimir Sorokin

Nella nuova generazione di scrittori russi chi si appassiona di più per il passato è Vladimir Sorokin, romanziere, poeta e artista prolifico che studiò ingegneria. In *Tridcataja ljubov' Mariny* (Il trentesimo amore di Marina, scritto nel 1982-84 ma pubblicato nel 1995) Vladimir Sorokin tratteggiò il quadro ironico di una giovane moscovita che oscilla nel suo impegno politico fra i dissidenti e i sovietici convinti. Gli amori, sia maschili che femminili, di Marina sfidano le convenzioni romanzesche per il numero consistente. Come molti romanzi post-sovietici, questo narra la storia di una

²¹ Vladimir Šarov, "Istorii moego otca", *Znamja*, 19 (2009).

²² Vladimir Šarov, Intervista a *Častnyi korrespondent*, 3 December 2008.

²³ Vladimir Šarov, "Ja ne čuvstvujju sebja ni učitelem, ni prorogo", *Družba narodov* 8 (2004).

²⁴ Vladimir Šarov, "Eto ja prožil žizn'", *Družba narodov*, 12 (2000).

comunità anziché di un individuo. Nella sua fase politica dissidente Marina immagina una Mosca sotterranea, simile al mondo degli zombi di Pelevin.

Sotto ai grattacieli di Stalin, sotto l'infantile Cremlino, simile a un teatro di marionette, sotto le costruzioni moderne giacciono le ossa schiacciate di milioni di torturati, assassinati dallo spaventoso congegno del Gulag [...] Niente è cambiato qui. Sembrava che il tempo si fosse ossificato o fosse stato cancellato per decreto. Le lancette degli orologi del Cremlino girano invano, come una bambola automatica senza una molla.²⁵

Paradossalmente, poiché ci sono così pochi monumenti sui luoghi che ospitavano i Gulag, si immagina che questi luoghi siano ovunque. Nella *fantasy* di Sorokin, Marina ha relazioni continue per tutta Mosca senza mai raggiungere un orgasmo, come una bambola meccanica cui manchi una molla, finché il trentesimo amore, un leader comunista, la soddisfa reintrappolando la sua mente nella retorica comunista. Questo romanzo erotico predisse con grande efficacia gli eventi politici del decennio seguente, quando Putin costruì la propria popolarità su due elementi: uno stile sovietico *retrò* e una mascolinità primitiva. Fra le tante letture possibili del romanzo di Sorokin, suggerisco di interpretare il trentesimo amore, e primo orgasmo, di Marina come un atto di lutto mimetico. Come il rapporto sessuale consumato su una tomba, scena prediletta del romanzo decadente degli inizi Novecento, l'appagamento di Marina proviene dalla riproduzione della sua perdita. Vivendo nell'ombra di un Cremlino che somiglia a un giocattolo, Marina, nell'orgasmo della coazione a ripetere, ripete i discorsi terrificanti del gulag.

In *Led* di Sorokin leggiamo la storia di Snegirev, non uno storico ma uno studente di astronomia, un disciplina che lui intende come "la storia dell'universo". All'inizio del terrore, nel 1928, Snegirev va in Siberia. Sta per morirvi in una palude, come il personaggio di Bykov, si imbatte invece in un frammento di ghiaccio magico, che cambia la sua natura. D'ora in poi Snegirev avrà poteri speciali e, in aggiunta, diventa insolitamente aperto all'idea della comunità, ma soltanto con chi è simile a lui. Invece di fare l'amore con le parole e i genitali, riesce a parlare direttamente dal cuore e i suoi pari rispondono usando lo stesso organo. Rinato attraverso questo ghiaccio, Snegirev recluta i suoi compagni umani martellandoli con il ghiaccio sacro. Alcuni sono completamente trasformati, ma molti vengono uccisi in corso d'opera. Il Popolo del Ghiaccio si apre la strada verso il centro del sistema sovietico che sfrutta per il loro tornaconto. A modo suo, la *fantasy* di Sorokin incarna la stessa disperata ricerca di significato che ispirava *Opravdanie* di Bykov. Il Popolo del Ghiaccio si infila nel NKVD e partecipa alla costruzione di un sistema di Gulag che viene usato come piantagione per selezionare e coltivare la loro comunione di sentimenti.

²⁵ Vladimir Sorokin, *Tridcataja ljubov' Mariny* (Moskva: AST, 1999), 122.

La *fantasy* apocalittica di Sorokin è molto diversa da quella di Pelevin, ma entrambi convergono nel dipingere i loro protagonisti come superumani che diventano parassiti degli umani. Contrariamente ai vampiri di Pelevin, il Popolo del Ghiaccio non succhia sangue; infatti, sono vegetariani. Eseguendo manipolazioni sacre su corpi umani, il Popolo del Ghiaccio si sforza di lottare per raggiungere un numero magico di confratelli, che provocherà la agognata fine del mondo.²⁶ Entrambi inventano storie alternative con toni che ricordano la narrativa russe religiosa, iniziando dal grande scrittore dello Scisma Russo, Avvakum. Come molti dei loro predecessori, i settari di Sorokin lottano per superare la storia ma inevitabilmente vi ritornano. [...]

È imbarazzante per lo storico che la memoria post-catastrofica spesso comporti allegorie anziché fatti e narrativa di immaginazione anziché documentazione d'archivio. Come abbiamo visto, nella condizione post-sovietica, i generi della cultura alta come il romanzo, giocano un ruolo centrale nei processi a doppio taglio del lutto e dell'ammonimento.²⁷ Immaginando umani come animali, mostri o bistecche viaggianti, gli autori post-sovietici rappresentano sia la loro vergogna per il passato che la paura per il futuro. Come la coscienza post-traumatica, la cultura post-catastrofica ciclicamente ritorna agli eventi sconvolgenti del passato. Vi ritorna sia volontariamente che involontariamente, a volte persino inconsciamente, senza riflessione o riconoscimento. Queste ri-presentazioni sono cicliche, ma naturalmente, non eterne. Come ogni memoria, la memoria intergenerazionale ha i suoi limiti. Tuttavia non sappiamo quando il processo del lutto finirà.

***Pochod na Kremľ'* (Processione al Cremlino) di Aleksej Slapovskij**

Molti si trovano a disagio nella la cultura russa post-sovietica, nei suoi aspetti corrotti, anti-intellettuali, ipermaschili, di solito violenti. Nel 2011-12 migliaia di moscoviti presero parte ai cortei di protesta contro il regime di Putin. Guidati a turno da un poeta, un avvocato, un grande giocatore di scacchi, un attivista ecologico, un autore di romanzi gialli, queste manifestazioni si presentavano come la protesta della

²⁶ Questa costruzione – riuscire a produrre un'apocalisse mutilando un numero mirato di uomini e donne – probabilmente deriva dal mito fondamentale della setta degli *skopcy* (castrati). Già *Šatuny* (1988) di Mamleev presentava un personaggio che era uno *skopec*; più tardi le sette russe hanno avuto rilevanza per le riflessioni filosofiche di Aleksander Dugin. *Zoloto Bunda* (2005) di Aleksej Ivanov descrive la lotta fra le comunità di Vecchi Credenti per impadronirsi del tesoro che Pugačev, il ribelle del diciottesimo secolo, si presume abbandonasse prima del suo arresto. In *Ukus angela* (2000) di Pavel Krusanov un Vecchio Credente vagante ispira un dittatore emergente citando Sigmund Freud e Johann Jakob Bachofen. Per il ruolo che i temi legati alle sette occupano nella letteratura e nel pensiero russo del tardo diciannovesimo secolo e nei primi anni del ventesimo, vedi Etkind, *Chlyst. Sekty, literatura i revoljucija*. Il risveglio di temi settari nella letteratura post-sovietica merita uno studio a parte.

²⁷ Vedi Alexander Etkind. *Warped Mourning. Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

“classe creativa” contro la coalizione governativa di burocrati, oligarchi, funzionari della difesa. Due gruppi sovrapposti hanno guidato questo movimento contro l'*establishment*. La partecipazione delle donne in questi raduni fu numericamente forte, ma l'aspetto simbolico delle loro manifestazioni sono state più importanti dei numeri. Strumentalizzando la loro femminilità nel nome della protesta politica, gruppi di donne radicali, come le ucraine Femen e le russe Pussy Riot, sconcertano e dominano il campo politico in entrambi i paesi. [...]

Benché le previsioni allarmate di rivoluzioni imminenti non siano mai mancate in Russia, il popolare drammaturgo e romanziere Aleksei Slapovskij anticipò la portesta anti-Putin nel suo *Pochod na Kremľ* (2010) con dettagliata e sorprendente precisione. L'assassinio di un giovane poeta scatena l'azione; la polizia di Mosca lo uccide senza ragione, dopo il lancio del suo primo libro di poesie. Gradualmente, e inaspettatamente, il suo funerale si trasforma in una processione politica di massa, in un evento magico che abbatte l'odiato regime del Cremlino. La processione funeraria va dai sobborghi fino alla Piazza Rossa, guidata dalla madre del poeta con il giovane fra le braccia. Dietro la madre, la processione accoglie e mescola persone molto diverse che Slapovskij descrive con coloriti dettagli, aggiungendo un pizzico di realismo sociale a un intreccio che è largamente magico e storicista, benché proiettato nel futuro. La processione è animata dal lutto, come ogni funerale; ma i cimiteri di Mosca non offrono posto per un poeta squattrinato, perciò la processione sceglie il Cremlino come destinazione, trasformando il lutto in protesta. Mentre la folla cresce, il rituale del lutto si unisce a una protesta improvvisata e questa combinazione ha un'efficacia così forte che tutti, persino i poliziotti, gli assassini, le forze di sicurezza, e infine, il gruppo dirigente del paese si uniscono alla madre in lutto e al figlio morto. Alla fine del romanzo, quando la Piazza Rossa è occupata dai manifestanti in lutto e il presidente si pente dei suoi crimini, dalla cima del mausoleo il poeta assassinato risorge miracolosamente.

In questo vangelo post-sovietico Cristo è un poeta, i miracoli sono politici e il potere fondamentale appartiene alla vittima. È istruttivo notare che per portare la processione al Cremlino e per costringere il Cremlino ad ascoltare la rabbia del popolo, Slapovskij abbia bisogno della magia: non appartiene al genere *fantasy* presentare plausibilmente il progetto di un abbattimento del regime che sia politico anziché magico. Ugualmente importante è l'accento che Slapovskij pone sul lutto come causa e motore propulsore della protesta politica. È una perdita personale che fa sì che il personaggio trovi la simpatia e il sostegno di molta gente, russa e non-russa, per guidare una manifestazione imponente e per iniziare una rivoluzione pacifica. In questa versione la formula “Siamo in lutto, ma non siamo schiocchi” deve leggersi diversamente: “Siamo sciocchi, perciò soltanto il lutto ci porterà al Cremlino”. Ed è la donna in lutto a condurre la processione vittoriosa al Cremlino.

Data la precisione realistica di molti dettagli, grandi e piccoli, della storia, si potrebbe leggere nei suoi orientamenti magici un commento triste e critico nei confronti del movimento di protesta. In molti modi quest'opera *fantasy* anticipò i

raduni di protesta del 2011 e 2012, articolandone l'obiettivo, l'itinerario, e la dimensione. Credo che nessuno fra gli scrittori più noti, persino quelli che guidarono la protesta, come Dmitrij Bykov o Boris Akunin, abbiano descritto gli eventi imminenti con uguale passione e precisione.

La polizia russa mostra poco rammarico per i milioni che perirono sotto il terrore sovietico. Tuttavia, la cultura post-sovietica ha prodotto forme di memoria inusuali, forse anche perverse. Come abbiamo visto due processi si uniscono su questa scena di trasformazione luttuosa post-catastrofica: lo straniamento del passato e il ritorno del rimosso. Scavando nel passato sepolto nel presente, lo studioso della cultura post-catastrofica osserva la memoria trasformarsi in immaginazione. In Russia molti autori e lettori sembrano condividere il desiderio di una ri-presentazione del passato catastrofico. È mia convinzione che si tratti di melanconia anziché di nostalgia. Nella famosa contrapposizione freudiana rispetto al "lutto sano", la logica della melanconia comprende la confusione tra presente e passato, la ripetizione ossessiva della perdita, e l'interruzione dei rapporti con il presente. "L'inibizione del melanconico ci pare sconcertante perché non riusciamo a vedere che cosa sia ad assorbirlo così interamente", Freud scrive.²⁸ La dialettica di ri-presentazione e straniamento produce un campo di immagini ricco, ma disorientante che assorbe la soggettività melanconica post-sovietica.

Le visioni spettrali di scrittori, registi, critici, e persino politici, russi allargano il lavoro del lutto fino a quegli spazi che disconoscono modi più razionali di comprendere il passato. In un paese dove milioni rimangono insepolti, i morti ritornano come non-morti. Lo fanno in romanzi, film e altre forme di cultura che riflettono, danno forma e prendono possesso della memoria delle persone. In Russia una visione condivisa del passato non si è mai sviluppata. Monumenti alle vittime del terrore sovietico e dell'avventurismo post-sovietico non sono stati innalzati. La memoria senza monumenti è vulnerabile, può essere vanificata da un processo ciclico e ricorrente di refutazioni e dinieghi. I sentimenti di colpa si possono lenire e placare con nuove voci, e anche i testi più influenti possono essere messi in discussione da nuovi testi. Fantasmi, vampiri, mostri e altre specie di non-morti si aggirano librandosi nello spazio pubblico, a disposizione dell'osservatore e a portata della conversazione condivisa con qualsiasi consumatore della strada. Rifiutano di abbandonare i vivi, finché coloro che furono illegalmente uccisi non siano stati ricordati dalla cultura alta e bassa, ufficiale e popolare, nazionalista e cosmopolita. Soltanto con questi atti multipli, infinitamente numerosi, di ri-cordo (riportare al cuore) e di re-integrazione la cultura russa potrà riacquistare la propria coerenza e integrità.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 245-68.

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LETTURE

PAOLO FURIA

UNITÀ E PLURALITÀ DEI MEZZI ARTISTICI:

Da Martin Heidegger a Daniel Albright.

Se si debba parlare di *una* arte, magari con la A maiuscola, unica e fondamentale, rispetto alla quale tutte le diverse pratiche artistiche non sono altro che derivazioni inessenziali, *oppure* di arti, nella loro diversità ed articolazione non sintetizzabili, è un tema tipico della riflessione filosofica sull'esperienza artistica.

Naturalmente, la discussione ha un rilievo intrinseco alla dimensione artistica in sé. Nella storia dell'arte moderna sono stati elaborati diversi principi di distinzione tra le arti: funzioni e scopi sociali e di fruizione differenti, rapporto privilegiato di un'arte con un *medium* specifico (come è noto, Charles Batteux ha aperto la strada a questa posizione, sostenendo che “così la pittura imita la bella natura con i colori, la scultura con i rilievi, la danza per mezzo dei movimenti e degli atteggiamenti del corpo. La musica la imita mediante i suoni inarticolati e la poesia, infine, per mezzo della parola misurata”.¹) corrispondenza di ciascuna arte con un senso o un altro. In questo quadro dobbiamo inserire anche la tripartizione kantiana tra le arti, che si differenziano per analogia con le differenti forme d'espressione e di comunicazione degli uomini: arte della parola, arte figurativa e arte del gioco delle sensazioni². Non mancano tuttavia, tanto a livello della riflessione quanto a quello della pratica artistica, tendenze allo sconfinamento di un'arte nell'altra, allo scambio dei media artistici, alla sinestesia. Si tratta di tendenze che, a partire dal primo romanticismo per arrivare fino all'arte multimediale della contemporaneità, passando per le esperienze dell'avanguardia primonovecentesca, vengono rivendicate per il loro potenziale sovversivo nei confronti di tradizioni del produrre artistico ormai considerate troppo vincolanti per la libera espressione.

¹ C. Batteux 1983, pp. 54-55.

² I. Kant 1993, pp.293-294.

Un artista come Klimt dipinge *The Beethoven Frieze* cercando di immaginare la *Nona Sinfonia* di Beethoven in termini visuali. Il nesso tra dipinto e musica è ovviamente in capo al visitatore dello spazio espositivo in cui il quadro è inserito. Questo è uno dei moltissimi esempi di comunicazione tra le arti che vengono studiati da Daniel Albright in *Panaesthetics*. L'autore vuole mostrare come un'opera d'arte possa trovare il proprio senso nel rinvio ad un'altra, in un gioco che l'artista comincia, ma che resta tra le mani dei fruitori. Un esempio come quello relativo all'opera di Klimt, apparentemente molto semplice, suscita invece domande profonde, che riguardano i ruoli dell'artista e del destinatario dell'opera, ma soprattutto l'opera stessa e la dinamica intrinseca che in essa si fa. La domanda sulla distinzione e la comunicazione delle arti rinvia dunque ad un'altra che concerne l'essenza stessa dell'arte: questione che rimane di grande attualità due secoli dopo la dichiarazione della sua morte, di hegeliana memoria, e dopo lunghe peregrinazioni per i sentieri della riproduzione tecnica, della contaminazione con i mondi del consumo e della produzione globale, sempre a cavallo tra dispersione e rilancio del suo senso e delle sue possibilità.

Le quattro tesi di Albright

Albright affronta il tema della distinzione e dell'unità tra le arti con un approccio induttivo e comparatistico. Il proposito dell'autore è chiaro ed esplicito sin dalle prime pagine dell'*Introduzione*: "The purpose of this book is to provide an introduction to the study of comparative arts"³. Se infatti il terreno delle letterature comparate è assai riconosciuto ed esplorato, quello dell'arte comparata come campo specifico di studi, sostiene Albright, non è stato ancora sufficientemente approfondito. Questo è vero, per l'autore, nonostante alcuni processi in corso nel mondo dell'arte e nei rapporti tra arte e mondo (primo tra tutti, la tecnicizzazione dell'esperienza e della fruizione artistica, che modifica radicalmente il funzionamento dei sensi e la percezione di spazio, tempo e qualità estetiche della realtà) vadano nella direzione di una sempre maggiore comunicazione tra le arti. Quello dell'arte comparata rimane il campo entro il quale Albright si mantiene con solidità, dedicando lunghi capitoli alla letteratura, alla pittura, alla musica e alle loro numerose relazioni attestate nella storia dell'arte. Dal momento che il proposito dell'autore è l'introduzione alla disciplina delle arti comparate, si riscontra nel suo libro uno sforzo definitorio interessante, con il quale vengono proposti strumenti di lavoro⁴ con cui è possibile cogliere alcune dinamiche empiriche di relazione tra le arti: consonanze, dissonanze, integrazione completa tra i media artistici (*concinnity*⁵), controcanto, rinvii tra le opere nelle intenzioni dell'autore o nella

³ *Ivi*, p. 2.

⁴ Cfr. Part Two, cap. 4, *New Definitions*, pp. 209-219.

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 210.

percezione soggettiva del fruitore (*pseudomorph* e *eidolon*). Nel libro si avanzano alcuni elementi di razionalità e ordine nell'immenso territorio delle arti comparate attraverso l'introduzione di categorie che hanno la finalità di classificare e sistematizzare i tratti salienti in cui si realizzano la comunicazione e lo sconfinamento di un'arte sull'altra.

Si è già fatto cenno alle implicazioni potenti della questione sull'unità, diversità e relazione tra le arti. Si tratta di questioni filosofiche di fondo che sono state pensate nel corso della storia più volte sin dall'antichità: lo statuto delle arti tra imitazione del vero e creazione del nuovo, il ruolo dell'artista, la dialettica, la differenziazione e la relazione tra i sensi, l'unicità dell'opera e l'avventura delle sue interpretazioni, il rapporto tra immagine, linguaggio e corpo. Albright tocca ciascuno di questi problemi seguendo il percorso induttivo del suo libro, facendo riferimento ad alcune tesi filosofiche fondamentali che vengono abbozzate a titolo di manifesto nella *Introduction* e rivelando le fonti di ispirazione teorica più significative.

Le tesi che Albright prepone alla trattazione delle singole arti e ai loro rapporti sono quattro. La prima è che ogni cosa è opera d'arte nella misura in cui essa può essere vista in quanto prodotta da un gesto, da un atto di volontà. Albright infatti sostiene che: "Anything is an artwork to the extent that it looks made. The Matterhorn is as much an artwork as the Monna Lisa, insofar as we understand it as something intended, an act of will"⁶. Si tratta di un assunto forte, che chiama in causa il ruolo dell'autore (o creatore) dell'opera, ma soprattutto dello sguardo di chi la contempla. Per quello che riguarda l'autore, la questione è chiara: un'opera è il prodotto del suo artificio. Ma in questa prospettiva, anche la volontà di Dio, alla stessa stregua dell'azione delle forze impersonali della natura, può contare come istanza artistica. Il punto è che, secondo Albright, "we are all animists to some degree, and when we perceive materialisation of forces (...), we feel the presence of an agent making a design"⁷: ecco perché, senza imbarazzi, possiamo, con Nietzsche, vedere il mondo nella sua totalità produttiva come un fenomeno estetico. La tesi dunque allude ad una sorta di sguardo estetico universale che guiderebbe tutti gli uomini per natura, e che non punta a confinare l'arte entro una dimensione specifica della produzione umana, né a differenziarla da altre forme di azione o di realtà. In questo quadro è rilevante osservare che un oggetto che non venga più colto nella sua artisticità da uno sguardo estetico, smette di essere a sua volta oggetto estetico. Viene dunque affidato allo sguardo dell'uomo il compito supremo di far emergere il potenziale estetico significativo di ogni oggetto del mondo. Due sembrano essere le questioni che si aprono a partire da questa tesi. Ad una abbiamo già fatto riferimento: come fondare, in questo frangente, lo specifico della produzione e della fruizione artistica rispetto ad altri tipi di esperienze e di dimensioni della vita e delle cose? La tesi proposta qui da Albright sembra strizzare l'occhio ad una riduzione

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

psicologica e soggettivistica dell'arte, la quale non ha significato come campo in sé: in altre parole, ogni tentativo di un'ontologia dell'opera d'arte sembra ridimensionato. Una tale fenomenologia dello sguardo artistico è in grado di cogliere effettivamente l'opera d'arte nella sua realtà e nella sua alterità rispetto al gioco di sguardi ed alle dinamiche psicologiche che potremmo coglierli alla base?

La seconda tesi afferma che l'opera d'arte agisce come una bambolina woo-doo⁸. Con questa immagine, Albright vuole trasmettere l'idea di un'opera che esercita un'influenza sulle nostre menti ed i nostri corpi, "whether we wish it to or not"⁹. Essa suscita in noi emozioni e pensieri che non controlliamo, ma lo può fare perché la sua stessa produzione è determinata dalla presenza di pensieri ed emozioni nell'autore, rispetto ai quali l'opera sarebbe una sorta di deposito enigmatico. L'opera, pur essendo fatto umano, non si lascia risolvere in una semplice dinamica di controllo e non può dunque essere governata e gestita, quanto alla sua produzione ed alla sua fruizione, in modo lineare e razionale. In questo senso, "the artwork is nothing but a reified dream"¹⁰. In questo contesto, Albright sembra riferirsi con maggior specificità all'arte prodotta effettivamente dall'uomo, piuttosto che all'arte come oggetto di uno sguardo estetico che può abbracciare, potenzialmente, la totalità del mondo e delle sue parti. In ogni caso, rispetto alla prima tesi, si deve insistere per un verso sulla relazione stretta che lega i soggetti e le opere e per l'altro sulla complessità irriducibile di tale interazione. L'opera d'arte, qui, pare recuperare parte della sua autonomia nei riguardi dello sguardo che la produce e ne fruisce.

La terza tesi afferma che le opere d'arte non parlano solo di se stesse e della loro origine storicamente collocata. Al contrario, ogni opera d'arte rinvia al gesto artistico originario: il gesto tramite il quale qualche cosa, che prima non c'era, adesso c'è. Dunque, "insofar as every artwork gestures at the uninflected surface (...) on which it takes shape, literature and painting and music have something strongly in common: a positive sense of the absence that prevailed before its presence"¹¹. Nel gesto artistico si fa il mondo, nel venire ad essere dell'opera si fa qualche cosa che resterà affidata alla storia. In questa tesi, Albright introduce anche il tema, profondamente filosofico, del rapporto tra significatività dell'opera d'arte e temporalità. Come l'opera viene ad essere, così essa presuppone la propria distruzione e rinvia, così, alla destino catastrofico del cosmo. L'opera ingaggia nella storia e con la storia un vero e proprio conflitto, che a sua volta fa storia. Così, Albright si chiede: "Would the Aphrodite of Milos move us as much if she still had her arms? The sculptor's plastic force at once consents to and resists the entropy that will reduce the sculpture to something shapeless"¹². In questa

⁸ *Ivi*, p.5.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 7.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 8.

tesi si devono cogliere due nodi interessanti. Il primo riguarda la relazione originaria tra le diverse arti quanto alla loro origine comune in un gesto con il quale il mondo viene a essere per l'uomo. L'orizzonte heideggeriano della filosofia di fondo di Albright viene tratteggiato con questo riferimento al fondamento ed all'origine dell'opera d'arte, la discussione sui quali, in Heidegger, non lascia spazio ad una riflessione di carattere comparatistico tra le diverse pratiche artistiche. Il secondo nodo sollevato da questa tesi è quello relativo alla dialettica tra opera e tempo. L'idea è che l'opera sia una forma gettata nella storia. In quanto forma, tende a resistere all'entropia della storia, non solo provando a mantenersi per quella che è, ma modificando i segni del tempo a proprio vantaggio. In questo senso, la mancanza delle braccia rende la Venere di Milo nuda e fragile ai nostri occhi, ma allo stesso tempo degna del massimo riguardo per via della sua silenziosa resistenza e, soprattutto, del più alto interesse grazie alla sua capacità di aprire al presente e al futuro mondi non solo distanti, ma anche irrimediabilmente perduti. La conciliazione tra riflessione empirica sulle pratiche artistiche e la loro comunicazione da una parte, e il pensiero dell'arte come gesto originario, luogo del venire ad essere della verità dall'altro, non è per nulla scontata: sin d'ora, però, occorre rilevare che precisamente questa conciliazione è la posta in gioco filosofica di Albright.

La quarta tesi, infine, articola il rapporto tra arte e linguaggio in maniera ingegnosa. Da un lato, infatti, viene affermato che l'arte appartiene alla dimensione del linguaggio e che ogni medium artistico è una forma linguistica. Questa appartenenza dell'arte al linguaggio rende possibile la traduzione e la comunicazione delle arti. Nel dominio del linguaggio, sostiene Albright, "everything is relatable to everything else"¹³. Richiamando alla relazione di fondo che sussiste tra arte e linguaggio, ed in questo seguendo coerentemente l'impianto emerso dalle tesi precedenti, Albright si allontana dall'idea di un'arte assoluta e di una coscienza estetica separata dall'esperienza del mondo. Questo riferimento alla relazione tra arte e linguaggio è inoltre funzionale alla dinamica della reversibilità tra le arti. Poiché il linguaggio è il luogo dei significati e delle loro reversibilità, affidate alla storia, il suo rapporto fondante con l'arte giustifica a priori la possibilità delle comunicazioni tra le arti, senza dover recuperare questa giustificazione all'interno del campo artistico stesso. Non è dunque necessario farlo attraverso la postulazione di una gerarchia delle arti e di un'arte superiore sotto la quale tutte le altre sarebbero sussunte e in virtù della quale potrebbero, così, entrare in comunicazione. Ma questa è solo una parte della tesi di Albright. L'altra parte è costituita dall'idea, in tensione con quanto appena espresso, che "every artwork, even a poem also exists in a different space, where it has no meaning"¹⁴. Albright non intende certo dire che, presa nella sua esistenza spaziale, un'opera d'arte non abbia significato. Il punto, semmai, è che il luogo del significato è il linguaggio, dove il tempo si fa storia:

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

ma l'opera non si riduce ad essere gioco linguistico a priori inesauribile, dunque non è solo deposito e custode di significati storici comunicabili, discutibili, trasferibili e deperibili. In quanto forma estetica, l'opera sta in uno spazio in cui "the concept of meaning has no meaning"¹⁵. Precisamente questa è la dimensione dell'ineffabile dell'arte. Se dunque da un lato la critica d'arte e l'ermeneutica delle opere, in quanto giocate sul piano linguistico, appartengono a pieno titolo alla dimensione artistica, il proprio dell'opera in quanto tale sembra giacere in un residuo ineffabile che, semplicemente, si impone. Proprio la presenza di questo residuo di ineffabilità in ciascuna opera ne tutela l'unicità e l'irriducibilità; per sua via, si è resa storicamente possibile la concezione dell'arte assoluta, poiché "this wonder, this convulsive beauty (as the surrealists called it), has tempted artists to find out whether an artwork could aspire to be all wonder, all residuum"¹⁶. Lo sforzo filosofico forse più significativo di *Panaesthetics* è precisamente quello di conciliare da una parte l'appartenenza dell'opera d'arte alla dimensione linguistica, dove per linguaggio si intende il discorso nel quale si determinano intersoggettivamente e storicamente i significati del vivere insieme, e dall'altra l'irriducibilità dell'opera in termini di residuo ineffabile, che Albright chiama proprio *wonder*.

Siamo dunque di fronte ad una meta-teoria artistica ed estetica che tiene insieme importanti tensioni. Occorrerebbe valutare se le risposte di Albright siano sufficienti a conciliarle per davvero, oppure se non vi siano, in questa meta-teoria, contraddizioni difficilmente sormontabili. Ma operare questa valutazione sarebbe forse superficiale, se non venisse svolta innanzitutto una chiarificazione dei presupposti filosofici che ispirano l'impianto di *Panaesthetics*. Questi presupposti sono, per ammissione dell'autore stesso, la già citata *Origine dell'opera d'arte* di M. Heidegger, e, ancorché meno ricorrente nel corso del testo, *Le Muse* di J.L. Nancy. Si tratta di presupposti filosofici che presentano alcuni punti di contatto, ma forse maggiori sono quelli di lontananza, come non mancheremo di osservare. Ci sembra che tuttavia entrambi agiscano con grande forza nell'elaborazione delle tesi di fondo che animano il discorso di Albright. Forse, alcune contraddizioni che vi si possono ritrovare sono da ricondurre precisamente all'articolazione del rapporto tra il testo di Heidegger, ben presente a Nancy, e quello di Nancy stesso: un rapporto che per alcuni versi sembra in effetti non sintetizzabile in un'unica proposta teoretica compiuta. Sulle contraddizioni di questi testi, in ogni caso, Albright sembra fare leva al fine di ritagliare uno spazio proprio ed originale di pensiero e, così, legittimare il campo di ricerca delle arti comparate, senza con ciò perdere quello sguardo di fondo col quale abbracciare l'intera dimensione estetica come dimensione della totalità altrimenti perduta.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

Panaesthetics e Heidegger: un debito tradito?

Presentando la quarta tesi della sua *Introduzione*, Albright afferma, in nota, che “in formulating these theses I am deeply indebted to Martin Heidegger’s great essay on the origin of the artwork, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935-36)”¹⁷. Il tema fondamentale su cui Albright individua il proprio debito nei riguardi di Heidegger è appunto quello della relazione originaria dell’arte con il linguaggio. Una relazione che, nel riconoscimento di un residuo di ineffabilità nell’opera d’arte, non risolve interamente l’opera nella dimensione linguistica, poiché, sostiene Albright, “every artistic medium is a language, but I can say this only because language understands everything as a language”¹⁸. Come si è precedentemente osservato, la relazione col linguaggio, pur non esaurendo il proprio dell’opera d’arte, ne specifica comunque alcuni tratti fondamentali: la possibilità dell’opera di essere trasposta e “continuata” in media differenti, la possibilità di un’ermeneutica e di una critica d’arte, la possibilità stessa dell’opera di agire come elemento culturale.

Sin qui, siamo alla presenza di un’originale riedizione della critica alla coscienza estetica formulata da Gadamer in *Verità e metodo*. Com’è noto, Gadamer contesta la separatezza del dominio estetico così come è stato concepito nella modernità e in particolare a partire dalla Critica del Giudizio kantiana (1790) e dalla sua ricezione. Al contrario, l’arte è questione di gusto e di cultura ed appartiene dunque a pieno titolo all’esperienza intersoggettiva degli uomini in dialogo nella storia: un’esperienza intrinsecamente ed originariamente linguistica. È appena il caso di notare che la tendenza ad un’interpretazione non autotelica ed autoreferenziale dell’arte caratterizza non solo l’ermeneutica filosofica, ma gran parte della tendenza artistica contemporanea e delle letture poetiche e filosofiche che la accompagnano. Vercellone, infatti, osserva che:

lo scambio tra l’arte e la realtà, la confusione tra l’una e l’altra è divenuto in fondo il panorama consueto dell’arte contemporanea che, sempre più, assume i lineamenti di un grande evento sociologico che ritrascrive la realtà e interagisce con essa.

Il superamento del divario estetico tra arte e vita appartiene anche alla sensibilità di Albright, come dimostra l’articolazione delle quattro tesi: viene chiamata in causa l’universalità dello sguardo estetico, l’appartenenza dell’opera d’arte alla dimensione linguistica e temporale. Sotto questo profilo, però, la posizione di Heidegger va considerata attentamente. Se infatti da un lato la tematizzazione ontologica che riguarda l’origine dell’opera d’arte va nella direzione del superamento della coscienza estetica come dimensione dell’arte isolata ed autoreferenziale ipostatizzata dal

¹⁷ Albright 2012, p. 8, nota 5, pg. 287.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 8.

romanticismo e dalla modernità in generale, dall'altro la riflessione sull'origine dell'opera d'arte non apre, di per sé, a nessuna forma di recupero empirico della produzione artistica contemporanea, sebbene una delle cifre di quest'ultima sia proprio l'affermazione di un legame con la vita, la società e la quotidianità. Nel superamento della coscienza estetica proposto da Heidegger, in effetti, il recupero del rapporto con la dimensione mondana, linguistica e sociale della dimensione estetica non è esauriente; anzi, se considerato esauriente, è persino fuorviante. In linea generale, va rilevato che il superamento heideggeriano della coscienza estetica, e del soggettivismo (implicito o esplicito) che lo accompagna, si colloca entro la più generale e fondamentale operazione di recupero della tematica ontologica che caratterizza lo Heidegger dei Sentieri interrotti. Il punto di caduta della polemica contro il soggettivismo, il trascendentalismo, il positivismo, l'empirismo e lo psicologismo è sempre l'essere; la filosofia dell'arte di Heidegger non fa eccezione a questo proposito generale che ne anima il pensiero. Non si tratta dunque di un recupero della dimensione mondana nel modo in cui viene tematizzata dalle numerose poetiche novecentesche, a partire dai manifesti dell'avanguardia. Non a caso, Heidegger "si distoglie dall'arte contemporanea perché non vi coglie tendenze esistenziali e ontologiche sia pure superficiali (...). Heidegger, filosofo, considera con distacco le trasformazioni dell'arte, situandosi nella prospettiva della sua concezione che non tiene conto dei fatti concreti"¹⁹. L'arte contemporanea, come celebrazione del banale, del quotidiano e come esercizio della tecnica come dimensione del dominio sulla realtà, è null'altro che l'espressione compiuta dell'epoca dell'immagine del mondo. La distinzione di soggetto e oggetto, che caratterizza, secondo Heidegger, l'epoca contemporanea, rappresenta una singolare condizione di oblio dell'essere: l'uomo pensa di vivere non *nel* mondo, ma *di fronte* ad esso. In questa condizione viene smarrita anche la vera natura dell'arte. La verità, nell'epoca dell'immagine del mondo, è velata: è *solo* immagine. Ed è per questo che è necessaria una riflessione più profonda intorno all'origine dell'arte, che è, insieme, anche riflessione sull'origine e l'essenza della verità.

D'altronde, la riflessione heideggeriana riguarda l'arte nella sua essenza, già sempre presente ed insieme frantesa o nascosta, in ogni epoca per ragioni diverse – perché la verità stessa in ogni epoca si apre e si nega in forme e modi diversi che solo una riflessione destabilizzante e radicale, quale quella ontologica proposta da Heidegger, è in grado di cogliere. Non sono dunque le interrogazioni storicamente collocate che riguardano la qualità artistica di questo o quella specifica opera, o la relazione tra arte e tecnica in una determinata epoca storica, a far problema per Heidegger. La natura dell'opera d'arte, la sua origine e la sua possibilità in relazione all'artista, alla società e all'esperienza in generale sono pensate dal filosofo tedesco in termini fondamentali, con il proposito di cogliere quei tratti di relazione con la verità che, a loro volta, rendono

¹⁹ Morawski 1971, p. 140.

possibili le diverse dimensioni storiche dell'artisticità, le loro manifestazioni e le loro contraddizioni. Ma è proprio questa impostazione a rendere la filosofia heideggeriana insensibile a tematiche quali quelle esplorate analiticamente e diffusamente da un testo come *Panaesthetics*: la disciplina delle arti comparate è tipicamente una riflessione di carattere empirico che mostra, tutt'al più, la possibilità della comunicazione tra le diverse arti, fondata su intuizioni filosofiche inerenti il rapporto tra arte, natura, verità e uomo fra le quali hanno spazio anche alcune suggestioni della filosofia heideggeriana. Certamente, tuttavia, l'arte comparata non dimostra l'unicità dell'arte contro la sua apparente pluralità: a dir il vero, il progetto stesso dell'arte comparata si fonda sull'idea che le arti siano, in ogni caso, molte e diverse. Ed è precisamente questo ad essere chiaro a Nancy, l'altro riferimento filosofico fondamentale di Albright.

Il proposito stesso dell'arte comparata sembra dunque essere un tradimento della ispirazione heideggeriana del lavoro di Albright. Si è tuttavia individuato nel rapporto tra linguisticità delle opere d'arte e presenza del residuo, che garantisce l'unicità dell'opera, uno dei luoghi di tensione teorica più interessanti di *Panaesthetics*. La sfida è quella di pensare congiuntamente i due poli di questo rapporto apparentemente contraddittorio. Come conciliare l'appartenenza dell'opera alla dimensione linguistica, che ne garantisce la trasmissione e la contaminazione mondana, con la sua permanenza in se stessa, il suo essere testimone silenziosa d'una dimensione non semantica che cattura la meraviglia e l'attenzione dello spettatore? Forse proprio in questa dialettica tra critica ed ermeneutica, da una parte, e residuo, dall'altra, si cela un tratto heideggeriano mai esplicitamente richiamato nel testo di Albright, ma che caratterizza in profondità la filosofia dell'arte di Heidegger: si tratta della relazione conflittuale tra Terra e Mondo. Com'è noto, ne *L'origine dell'opera d'arte*, l'opera d'arte è il luogo della lotta tra Mondo e Terra.

Il Mondo, afferma Heidegger, "non è il mero insieme di tutte le cose, numerevoli e innumerevoli, note e ignote. Il Mondo non è neppure una semplice rappresentazione aggiunta alla somma delle cose semplicemente-presenti. (...). Dove cadono le decisioni essenziali della nostra storia, da noi raccolte o lasciate perdere, disconosciute e nuovamente ricercate, lì si mondifica il Mondo"²⁰. Nel Mondo il *Dasein* si ritrova ad esistere come progetto gettato; le direttrici essenziali intorno a cui si costituisce un destino, che sono culturali, linguistiche, storiche e simboliche, vengono all'uomo: questo venire all'uomo non è che il mondificarsi del Mondo per l'uomo. Nell'opera, si espone un Mondo. Il mondificarsi del Mondo è il momento in cui il Mondo acquista il privilegio dell'articolo indeterminativo, "un": ogni Mondo è dimensione di apertura significativa e di senso, che è sottoposta ai cambiamenti imposti dal prosieguo del gioco storico. Che il Mondo in Heidegger sia il luogo del significato come accadere della verità in relazione allo sguardo dell'uomo storico che la coglie nell'apertura temporale

²⁰ Heidegger 1968, p. 30.

dell'ente, ed abbia dunque a che fare con la sfera della produzione collettiva dei significati, è del tutto chiaro: "Il Mondo è l'autoaprentesi apertura delle ampie vie delle opzioni semplici e decisive nel destino di un popolo storico"²¹. In quanto dimensione dei significati, il Mondo è quel polo costitutivo dell'opera d'arte che rende possibile la sua ermeneutica, la sua critica e la sua dispersione nel gioco della trasmissione storica. Se l'opera, in quanto luogo dello storicizzarsi della verità, trova nel Mondo uno dei suoi due poli costitutivi, se ne deve trarre, da un lato, la conferma dello statuto storico ed evenemenziale della verità, e, dall'altro, l'affermazione del ruolo del Mondo come espressione della storicità dell'opera d'arte e della verità in essa manifestata. Il fatto però che nel Mondo non si risolva interamente l'opera d'arte è decisivo. Ciò significa che, in Heidegger, l'opera d'arte non si risolve nella dimensione linguistica, storica e destinale che il Mondo porta con sé. Il richiamo alla terrestrità dell'opera, da questo punto di vista, limita la sua dispersione mondana e, per così dire, ermeneutica, imponendo un riferimento ontologico più forte, ma allo stesso tempo muto, che riguarda unicamente la singola opera ed il rapporto specifico che in essa si realizza tra "un" Mondo e "la" Terra.

Il punto è insomma che l'opera d'arte, oltre ad esporre un Mondo, portatore dei significati storici affidati al gioco della temporalità, rinvia sempre a qualcosa d'altro, che risuona nella silenziosa presenza terrestre. Come è noto, la Terra si presenta in Heidegger come il fondo vitale a cui ogni dischiudersi mondano rinvia; un fondo muto e resistente, che ingaggia, in virtù del suo carattere ineffabile, una lotta aperta con il Mondo. Non solo dunque l'opera si muove, per dir così, nella costituzione temporale del Mondo; essa anche riposa, dimora in se stessa e fonda in se stessa la propria unicità inesauribile. La resistenza che la Terra, "l'autochiudentesi per essenza"²², agisce nei confronti del Mondo non è tuttavia un mero negativo. Essa è la condizione del sorgere del Mondo come apertura. Ecco perché Heidegger afferma che "l'autochiudersi della Terra non è per nulla una chiusura uniforme e rigida; esso si svolge in una pienezza inesauribile di maniere e forme semplici"²³ che sono oggetto di una considerazione privilegiata da parte dell'artista, che nulla ha a che spartire con la strumentalità. Heidegger scrive:

Lo scultore ha certamente bisogno della pietra, con cui anche il muratore ha a che fare a modo suo. Ma lo scultore non usa la pietra. Ciò avviene solo, in certo modo, quando l'opera fallisce. Certamente anche il pittore ha bisogno della materia colorata ma anziché usarla la porta ad illuminarsi. (...) In nessun caso è presente nell'opera qualcosa come un materiale d'opera"²⁴ (*Ivi*, pp. 32-33).

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 33.

²² Heidegger 1968, p. 32.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 32-33.

In questo senso, è importante distinguere la Terra, viva nella sua chiusura generosa e libera, e la materia, morta nel suo essere a disposizione di uno sfruttamento antropocentrico. Lo sguardo che muove l'artista coglie la Terra nel suo presentarsi silente, nel suo semplice donarsi come chiusa e resistente. Si tratta di uno sguardo rispettoso e carico di meraviglia: lo sguardo che sta alla base del wonder, o residuo, di Albright, e che, anche in Albright, ha a che fare con l'unicità del medium in cui l'opera viene a compiersi. Sul residuo, Albright dice le seguenti parole:

By *residue*, I mean the *x* that critics and intermedial artists keep trying to elucidate, to bring into the field of the comprehended, but that will always remain untouched, or touched only glancingly, obliquely (...) Here the original medium is everything; here the signifiers in the artwork point to signifieds that can exist only in the original medium, indeed only in the original artwork, triumphant in its autotelic solitude.²⁵

Sarebbe ovviamente possibile fraintendere il residuo di Albright considerandolo una specie di "resto" romantico, soprattutto alla luce dell'accostamento esplicito che l'autore di *Panaesthetics* compie tra residuo e sublime. Si tratterebbe peraltro di una reminiscenza ben difficilmente conciliabile con l'impianto fondamentalmente post-estetico (cioè oltre i confini della coscienza estetica) e pan-estetico proposto da Albright. In effetti, proprio il riferimento a Heidegger rende possibile pensare l'opera in un contesto che è radicalmente ulteriore rispetto alla coscienza estetica, mantenendo tuttavia un quid di unicità e di ineffabilità, senza ridursi a puro fenomeno culturale, integralmente riducibile a fatto linguistico. La Terra heideggeriana, infatti, non è un residuo romantico intorno al quale fondare l'autoreferenzialità artistica, bensì un'istanza ontologica che radica la produzione artistica esattamente al centro dell'eventualità dell'essere. Se questa impostazione interpretativa è corretta, dunque, sarà possibile riferire la meraviglia²⁶ e l'ineffabilità dell'opera in Albright alla potenza impenetrabile del medium, parola che Heidegger non avrebbe mai perdonato (per via

²⁵ Albright 2012, pp. 220-221.

²⁶ L'opera, in quanto combinazione eventuale di Mondo e Terra, in cui la verità si fa storica, genera un urto che impatta direttamente sulle concezioni ordinarie, quotidiane e inautentiche in cui si muove l'esserci abitudinario. Il potere della verità in opera è proprio quello di "trasformare i nostri rapporti abituali col Mondo e con la Terra, sospendere ogni modo abituale di fare e di giudicare, di conoscere e di vedere, per soggiornare nella verità che si storicizza nell'opera" (*L'origine dell'opera d'arte*, 1968, p. 50). In fondo, l'esperienza di sollevamento rispetto alle categorie quotidiane, procurata dalla contemplazione dell'opera d'arte, è la stessa che Albright riconduce alla figura del sublime connesso al residuo: "The sublime abolishes the normal categories of experience: time and space grow disoriented, confused; and even the sense of self vanished. A sublime experience in without subject or object" (Albright, 2012, p. 221).

della distinzione tra Terra e mezzo, o Terra e materia), ma che, secondo l'uso albrightiano, per come viene connotata, appare, infine, pertinente.

Lo sfondo heideggeriano del lavoro di Albright, dunque, regge alla prova della verifica. Non solo: sembra che il riferimento alla dialettica Mondo/Terra fondi in maniera appropriata la dialettica tra linguisticità dell'opera e residuo. L'unicità dell'opera d'arte sembra fondarsi, in Heidegger come in Albright, sulla resistenza che uno dei due poli costitutivi oppone all'arrembaggio dell'altro – e all'irriducibile e singolare configurazione che questa lotta tra i due poli assume in ciascuna opera con contenuti e secondo modalità diverse. Ciò che, di contro, non sembra invece fondarsi sull'ispirazione filosofica heideggeriana è, come si è detto, l'attenzione empirica per la pluralità delle pratiche artistiche e l'esame puntiglioso e diffuso delle figure dell'intermedialità che caratterizzano il lavoro sull'arte comparata di Albright. In primo luogo, ovviamente, perché la riflessione di Heidegger è filosofia; laddove, invece, quella di Albright, pur muovendo da tesi ed assunti filosofici, tratta a piene mani i materiali provenienti dalla cultura e dalla storia cimentandosi con una pluralità di discipline con le quali entra in dialogo. Ma vi è forse una ragione più profonda. In verità, l'intermedialità non è il concetto della fusione e dell'unicità dell'arte tout court. Con gli strumenti messi in campo da Albright si può pensare l'unicità *dell'opera* d'arte; ma non si può in nessun modo pensare l'unicità *dell'arte*, rispetto alla quale le diverse pratiche artistiche sarebbero solo exempla, o peggio, illusioni. Al contrario, la differenza tra le arti, ancorché mai a priori e già sempre affidata al gioco della storia, è la precondizione per ogni possibile comunicazione intermediale. Ma qui non c'è più Heidegger. Qualche interprete ha anzi intravisto, ne *L'origine dell'opera d'arte*, il misconoscimento del ruolo autonomo e sperimentale delle pratiche artistiche, in quanto, si legge nel testo, "ogni arte, in quanto lascia che si storicizzi l'avvento della verità dell'ente come tale, è nella sua essenza Poesia (*Dichtung*)"²⁷. Ovviamente sarebbe un grave fraintendimento del pensiero heideggeriano, se si concepissero tutte le arti come sottospecie dell'arte della parola²⁸. Non è questa la sede per affrontare il significato, intimamente ontologico, della riconduzione di tutte le arti alla Poesia come *Dichtung*. Ci basti, qui, riconoscere che è assai problematico pensare la pluralità delle pratiche artistiche alla luce di un principio ontologico fondamentale: anche solo per via della sua illuminante potenza, esso finirebbe per ricacciare nella dimensione dell'inautenticità ogni indagine di carattere empirico che riguarda le arti, nella loro insopprimibile pluralità.

²⁷ Heidegger, 1968, p. 56.

²⁸ Non è questo il tipo di principio che Heidegger cerca di cogliere e d'altronde l'autore è su questo chiarissimo: "Se ogni arte è, nella sua essenza, poesia, l'architettura, la scultura e la musica dovranno poter essere ricondotte alla Poesia (*Poesie*). Ma non si tratterà di un arbitrio? Certo, se concepissero le arti suddette come sottospecie dell'arte della parola, se è lecito designare la poesia con questa espressione facilmente equivocabile. Ma la poesia (*Poesie*) è soltanto un modo della progettazione illuminante della verità, cioè del Poetare (*Dichtung*) nel senso più ampio" (*Ivi*, p. 57).

Non a caso, infatti, Albright riconduce la reciproca intima affinità delle arti ad un principio di unità che contempla, a priori, la differenza e la pluralità: il corpo. Non solo il linguaggio in quanto tale, dunque: ma il linguaggio in quanto, in fin dei conti, prodotto dell'esperienza del mondo che è già sempre, ed in primo luogo, esperienza che il corpo fa di se stesso e del mondo. La corporeità è dunque il principio che unifica sempre producendo la diversità ed essendo sin dall'inizio già sempre diversità: ma questa è la lezione che, dalla Fenomenologia di Merleau-Ponty, arriva sino a Jean-Luc Nancy e, per sua via, Albright.

Nancy, Albright, il corpo e la differenza

Il titolo del testo di J.-L. Nancy che Albright cita in nota come un riferimento per il suo libro, *Le Muse*, implica già una prima semplice considerazione inerente la pluralità: "Ci sono le Muse, non la Musa. Il loro numero è stato variabile, come i loro attributi, ma le Muse sono sempre state più d'una. È questa origine multipla che deve interessarci"²⁹. In Nancy, la discussione sulla pluralità delle arti è indissolubilmente legata a quella sull'origine dell'arte, in modo da incontrare rapidamente il punto di vista heideggeriano. Riguardo a questo, Nancy nota che: "Non solo l'arte non risiede essenzialmente nella diversità delle sue "modalità", né delle sue "opere", ma non risiede neppure più nell'arte. La sua singolarità è ancora a monte, con tanta maggior dignità quanto meno riesce percepibile come "arte" e, peggio ancora, come molteplicità di pratiche artistiche"³⁰. Sembra che Albright, che sceglie di lavorare proprio sulla molteplicità delle pratiche ed esperienze artistiche, condivida l'appunto di Nancy e lo faccia proprio.

A sua volta, la riflessione di Nancy non si limita ad affermare la legittimità della pluralità delle arti sulla base della diversità delle pratiche artistiche concretamente esistenti. Al contrario, è questa legittimità a dover essere interrogata. I filosofi che hanno prediletto l'ipotesi di un'Arte unica, alla luce della quale ogni pratica artistica perda la propria identità conchiusa, hanno ragione quando sottolineano la tendenza pluri-sensuale e multi-mediale dell'arte, la mescolanza dei sensi coinvolti nella produzione artistica, quando intendono storicizzare e porre ad un livello di relativa inautenticità i confini che dividerebbero l'espressione artistica secondo criteri (come la corrispondenza tra arte specifica e singolarità del medium) che finirebbero per mutilarla. La stessa fisiologia contemporanea, osserva Nancy, sembra smentire le distinzioni di principio tra i cinque sensi, sulla base di studi che dimostrano l'esistenza di modalità percettive, proprie dell'animale, che non sarebbero relative ad un solo senso per differenza con gli altri.

²⁹ *Le Muse*, 2006, p. 19.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 22.

Lo sconfinamento dell'esperienza sensoriale di un senso verso i campi degli altri o verso campi comuni non è mai tale da garantire, però, un'integrazione sensoriale completa. L'eterogeneità dei sensi non è, afferma Nancy, distinzione stabile, ma neppure mera illusione. L'eterogeneità, la differenza, sono invece all'origine dell'esperienza sensoriale e rendono possibile tanto la distinzione quanto la comunicazione e lo sconfinamento. Il rapporto complesso tra singolare e plurale, totale e zonale, viene da Nancy spiegato ricorrendo alla dinamica erotica, secondo la descrizione freudiana. "Le zone erogene non valgono di per se stesse, non si definiscono attraverso la destinazione"³¹, sostiene Nancy, riprendendo Freud, il quale, in *Tre Saggi sulla teoria sessuale ed altri scritti*, afferma: "La funzione spettante alle zone erogene è chiara. Ciò che è valido per una, vale per tutte. Esse vengono completamente impiegate a produrre con appropriata stimolazione un certo ammontare di piacere, dal quale deriva l'intensificazione della tensione (...)"³². Eppure, le zone erogene sono nello stesso tempo "zone", connotate da differenze sensibili, e sensibilmente ben presenti al soggetto esposto alla stimolazione. La dinamica del piacere, secondo Nancy, funziona su differenze di stimolazione, sul non ancora e sul gioco dell'intensificazione che ora si modera ed ora si accentua, sullo spostamento dell'attrito che copre una zona scoprendone un'altra, sulla sinestesia che è ben integrata nel gioco della differenza. Insomma: il desiderio è "la discrezione del piacere"³³.

La riflessione sull'erotismo che Nancy propone non si presta certamente ad una metafora occasionale. Come l'arte, infatti, l'erotismo si fonda sulla priorità del tatto in quanto senso dell'interruzione corporea, grazie al quale il corpo si sa presente a se stesso e, nella differenza, rinasce. Il tatto non è, dunque, un senso come gli altri. Esso, dice Nancy, "fa corpo con il sentire, o fa del sentire un corpo: è il *corpus* dei sensi"³⁴. Se c'è dunque un fondamento unico dell'arte, secondo Nancy, esso è il corpo: extra-artistico, ma già sempre estetico, in quanto *ratio essendi* della complessa avventura sensibile nella quale esso stesso si costituisce e viene a essere per sé. L'esperienza corporea è la dimensione del venire-ad-essere del mondo nella sua diversità originaria: la pluralità del mondo riecheggia nella pluralità intrinseca all'esperienza sensibile, senza per questo esserne fondata o, al contrario, esserne a fondamento. Le arti non sono nient'altro che la celebrazione di questa inesauribile pluralità, il segno della differenza come cifra del fondamento, al posto e in luogo del fondamento. Infatti, nella visione di Nancy, l'arte articola l'unità vivente dell'organico, della percezione e dell'azione in "zone", le quali vengono astratte, esplorate, potenziate. La musica, per esempio, si fonda sull'astrazione del suono dall'esperienza percettiva, la quale lo contempla sempre mescolato con altri aspetti che toccano altri sensi, e fonda un dominio sonoro in cui,

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 35.

³² *Ivi*, p. 517.

³³ *Le Muse*, 2006, p. 36.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 37.

solo ed astratto dal resto, diventa oggetto di una considerazione speciale. Il mondo astratto della musica si costituisce di armonie e note, sequenze melodiche e tonalità, ritmi e timbri. In questo modo, l'astrazione non indebolisce l'esperienza percettiva, ma ne intensifica una zona. Ecco le parole di Nancy:

Così facendo, l'arte dis-loca il "senso comune" o la sinestesia ordinaria, o la fa toccarsi da sé in un'infinità di punti o di zone. La diversità prolifera, non solo tra i grandi registri sensoriali, ma attraverso ognuno di essi: colore, sfumatura, impasto, luce, ombra, superficie, massa, prospettiva, contorno, gesto, movimento, colpo, grana, timbro, ritmo, sapore, profumo, dispersione, risonanza, tratto, duzione, dizione, gioco, pausa, lentezza, profondità, istante, durata, velocità, durezza, spessore, vapore, vibrazione, struttura, emanazione, penetrazione, sfioramento, tensione, tema e variazione, et cætera, cioè all'infinito dei tocchi demoltiplicanti.³⁵

La zona, opportunamente invasa da un'esperienza che si concentra su di lei (proprio come avviene nel caso della zona erogena), destina i prodotti della sua stimolazione alla intensificazione dell'unità estetica, alla sinestesia costitutiva del corpo proprio. All'attenzione per le dinamiche peculiari di articolazione di singolare e plurale del corpo proprio, di radice fenomenologica, si aggiunge, nel tono e nei contenuti stessi della teoria estetica di Nancy, un riferimento significativo al pensiero di Derrida. In Nancy, porsi contro l'unità delle arti si traduce in un essere contro la pretesa, di matrice metafisica, idealistica, ontologica o trascendentale, di ridurre l'arte ad una qualche forma di Assoluto, l'Uno che contiene e sintetizza dualità e pluralità. La priorità della differenza, da un lato, situa l'origine dell'arte nel terreno antepredicativo dell'esperienza sensibile e delle sue sfumature inesauribili; dall'altro, difende il principio dell'indicibilità dell'opera d'arte, almeno nella misura in cui l'opera non può essere ridotta a forma culturale discorsivamente risolvibile. La priorità dell'artistico, che Nancy fa valere anche rispetto alla sfera del religioso, è tuttavia solo un indice, per dirla con Derrida: non si tratta del privilegio di una rivelazione superiore. La priorità dell'arte è la celebrazione del plurale, della differenza e, dunque, del rifiuto dell'Assoluto, compreso ovviamente quello artistico:

Superare il Romanticismo, significa pensare rigorosamente l'in-finito, cioè la sua costituzione finita, plurale, eterogenea. La finitezza non è la privazione, ma l'affermazione in-finita di ciò che è continuamente prossimo alla fine, che *tocca* la sua fine.³⁶

Anche la filosofia di Nancy, così risolutamente anti-idealistica, riconosce all'opera d'arte un residuo resistente alla dispersione semantica ed ermeneutica, come ha fatto Albright:

³⁵ *Ivi*, cit., pp. 42-43.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 60.

Non è possibile toccare, entrare in contatto (attraverso il discorso del senso) con l'opera d'arte. Non è possibile far entrare quest'opera nell'elemento del senso (...) se non interrompendo la presa del discorso (conformemente alla legge del tatto, del toccare) attraverso un "ermetismo" in cui l'opera d'arte si tocca solo da sé, o è, rispetto a sé, la sua propria immanenza.³⁷

Questo residuo, questa ineffabilità vale anche come resistenza dell'oggetto artistico alla forma linguistica della comprensione e della spiegazione. Come la Terra heideggeriana, come il residuo di Albright, così anche l'opera artistica di Nancy non può essere esaurita dalla dimensione linguistica. Tuttavia, da Nancy più che da Heidegger, Albright riprende la centralità della corporeità come principio e destinazione dell'esperienza estetica, come dimostra l'attenzione che, nelle ultime pagine di *Panaesthetics*, l'autore rivolge alla danza: "I have had little to say about dance in this book (...) mostly because I understand each art individually as a dance, and all the arts together as the aggregate dance of the body of the whole human race"³⁸. Sul corpo, Albright è ancora più esplicito: "All art is inscribed on the body. The corporeality of art may not always be easy to see, but it is always there (...) The arts are easy to join because they were never strongly separated in the first place"³⁹. Ed è proprio questa la cifra della riflessione di Nancy.

Conclusioni

Se qualcosa di fondamentale deve esserci alla base tanto della filosofia dell'arte di Heidegger, quanto di quella di Nancy, ciò deve consistere nell'attenzione per l'arte come dimensione originaria: dell'essere in Heidegger, dell'esperienza corporea in Nancy. La tensione tra le figure dell'essere messe in campo da *L'origine dell'opera d'arte* e quelle dell'esperienza su cui ha lavorato Nancy è la tensione che anima i presupposti teorici di Albright. Non sembra che l'autore si sia dedicato a sciogliere i nodi evidentemente aperti da questo non semplice incontro di prospettive teoriche: è per questo che *Panaesthetics* dà talvolta l'impressione di non puntare alla piena precisione filosofica. Se tra le quattro tesi esposte in apertura vi sono punti di attrito oppure, talvolta, passaggi non giustificati, dobbiamo tenere conto che ciascuna delle tesi prese per sé ha alle spalle la lettura dei contributi di Heidegger, di Nancy e di molti altri ancora. D'altra parte, come si è detto, la scommessa dell'autore è quella di lavorare sulla pratica dell'arte comparata. In ogni caso, la combinazione, ancorché tensionale, di elementi tratti dalla tradizione ontologico-ermeneutica aperta da Heidegger, e da altri, raccolti dal pensiero francese contemporaneo, apra la possibilità di pensare un'arte non assoluta che stia tuttavia sul crocevia originario tra uomo e realtà, esperienza ed essere.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 57.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Panaesthetics*, 2012, p. 281.

Un'arte che, per questo, sia oggetto di un'attenzione che trascenda vigorosamente i limiti della coscienza estetica, dove la modernità, credendo di renderle servizio, l'ha confinata.

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