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### Beckett, Derrida and the event of Literature

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## **Concluding Remarks**

After Alain Badiou (as part of his crusade against sophistry and for the vindication of the question of truth) accused philosophy of confusing its task with that of literature<sup>685</sup> and pleaded for their neat separation, the periodically returning question of the relation between the two -- how they perceive each other, what they can mean to each other and whether (and in what way) they can supplement each other -- was reopened. Among the thinkers who consider it worthwhile to occupy themselves with this issue Jacques Derrida has given it particular credit and attention -- not least because it is intimately connected with his other pursuits: the singular event, iterability and *différance*. When however we consider the multiplicity of written and oral responses to literary works that Derrida has delivered over the years, his repeatedly brief and courteous refusal to comment on the "both too close and too distant" work of Samuel Beckett remains a telling moment of silence. I have attributed this silence to Derrida's difficulty with Beckett's refusal to address the unique, and more in general, with the latter's refusal to archive or to gather -- gestures that for him were equivalent with the exercise of control or authority. Beckett on the one hand denounced this proper to writing pursuit of control or mastery and on the other always dreamt of an "ill-seen, ill-said" writing that would place itself beyond this pursuit.

I started my argument by showing that Derrida tends to read literary works in terms of the relation between a singular event and a general law. The two literary gestures that capture the poles of this relation -- the archiving and the juridical -- are shown by him to be impossible without one another. On the one hand, the singular could never appear without dividing itself at the origin, that is, without disappearing as singular and appearing as iterable (which is the first condition of the possibility of its authorizing a law). The juridical, on the other hand, would be devoid of force without appealing to the originary silence of the singular that has thus effaced itself: the "mystical foundation of [its] authority." Derrida demonstrates the necessary coexistence of these two movements in his essay on Roland Barthes wherein a singular event (of death) is shown to stretch itself into a "terrifying and endless series" that in turn becomes an implicit law governing Barthes' attempt to establish a "science of the singular."

Throughout this reading of the position of literature in Derrida's project, Beckett's gesture of emptying the archives and his refusal to gather remained opposed to that project. I consequently mobilized three philosophical motives to account for Beckett's recalcitrance to gather: the perception of Beckett through the focus of the failure of meaning, attributable to ordinary language philosophy, Deleuze's "exhausting" and Badiou's "methodic subtraction."

Reading Beckett through the focus of ordinary language philosophy means taking what this work says literally, emphasizing the literal and the banal side of Beckett's language (nothing more is meant than what is said, or even less is meant than what is said). It is a legitimate gesture taking into account Beckett's preoccupation with the worn-out character of our language. For Marjorie Perloff, Beckett's exploration of the literal language is diagnostic in nature: in her view Beckett's work consists in wondering about the functioning of language, experimenting with situations where it is brought towards the limit of meaning. Cavell, in an old essay on Beckett, went further: his is a quietist interpretation where the failure to mean is not the object of exploration but the desired goal of the whole enterprise. According to Cavell, the "literalization" of language in Beckett is a way of "undoing" it and together with it, undoing the, proper to humanity, "curse of meaning," "belief" and "knowing."<sup>686</sup> In other words, Beckett is not about "the failure of meaning" but about its "total, even totalitarian, success -- our inability not to mean what we are given to mean."<sup>687</sup> And about an attempt to undo this "curse."

Beckett read through this last insight represents the functioning of our language as the little comforting games Vladimir and Estragon play with each other in order to pass the time. "Will you not play?" "That's the idea, let's contradict each other." "Let's ask each other questions."<sup>688</sup> Pozzo exemplifies here a man who simply cannot function without recourse to the right context and grammar:

POZZO: I'd like very much to sit down, but I don't quite know how to go about it. ESTRAGON: Could I be of any help? POZZO: If you asked me perhaps. ESTRAGON: What? POZZO: If you asked me to sit down.

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<sup>685</sup> "[F]etishism of literature," Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 66.

<sup>686</sup> Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game. A Reading of Beckett's Endgame," *passim*.

<sup>687</sup> Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game. A Reading of Beckett's Endgame," 117. See also the discussion of Cavell's reading of Beckett in Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing; Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 179-180.

<sup>688</sup> Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 59, 68.

ESTRAGON: Would that be a help? POZZO: I fancy so. ESTRAGON: Here we go. Be seated, sir, I beg of you. POZZO: No, no, I wouldn't think of it! [*Pause. Aside.*] Ask me again. ESTRAGON: Come come, take a seat, I beseech you, you'll get pneumonia. POZZO: You really think so? ESTRAGON: Why it's absolutely certain. POZZO: No doubt you are right. [*He sits down.*] Done it again! [*Pause.*] Thank you dear fellow."<sup>689</sup>

From Beckett's perspective, the games like those played in *Waiting for Godot* make clear that the realm of language games, even though successful in refraining from essentialist gestures, presupposes the same recourse to mastery as they do – it is just a mastery of the real rather than of the ideal, of the mundane repetition rather than of the essence that it might give access to. Due to this context of mastery gained in repetition it is a truly miserable world in which these three are playing language games while waiting for Godot: its impoverishment is not yet purely and simply "methodical": the mastery is denounced but without an alternative, quietist or other. The language games fail to give comfort because they do not bring about any change: in the end, as before, "nothing happens." In other words the fact that here language can still be depended on does not change anything about the lack of prospect that the characters have to endure. The functioning of the game is not nearly enough without an attempt to account for the unpredictable that transcends the scope of the game. Beckett on the one hand denounces the omnipresence of mastery in language and writing -- including his own -- and on the other hand dreams of a kind of writing that, through assuming radical poverty, would release itself from this gesture of mastery.

It is rather in this sense that Beckett's enterprise is directed at trying to capture the breakdown of a language game and not in the sense Perloff ascribes to it. Perloff's explanation of the breakdown of language in *Watt* (as demonstrating what happens when words are used out of context) in no way accounts for the later Beckett's *passion* for what he calls "ill-saying." In this respect Badiou's astute reading of Beckett's later work is more helpful: in *Worstward Ho* it becomes clear, if it was not yet so in *Watt*, that "ill-saying" does not denote a failure that has to be overcome or avoided but to the contrary, is the *telos* of Beckett's artistic enterprise. "Beckett's

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<sup>689</sup> Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 36.

fundamental thesis is that *the saying that is adequate to the said suppresses saying*. Ill saying is the free essence of saying.<sup>690</sup> Badiou interprets Beckett's ill saying as the opening of language towards the unpredictable: a "new" language that will be able to name events that remain invisible in the framework of prevailing language.

Cavell's reading was not unaware of its possible quietist implications. Towards the end of the essay Cavell recalls Beckett's reply to a suggested contradiction between his pursuit of not having to mean on the one hand and his continuing to write on the other: "Que voulez-vous, Monsieur? C'est les mots. On n'a rien d'autre."<sup>691</sup> This seems to suggest that Beckett's pursuit of silence should not be taken too literally – or that it is not his only pursuit.

I then turned to a possibility of approaching Beckett's gesture of emptying the archives that was opened by Deleuze's reading. According to this reading Beckett's goal can be seen as analogous to Spinoza's God: to exhaust himself in his creation. In other words Beckett's gesture of hollowing out (emptying language of words and words of their content, as in a cliché), the "exhausted" nature of his writing, can be seen not merely as a desire to turn silent and embrace the void but as a reflection on Beckett's position as an author of his work. What the ordinary-language reading saw as the evacuation of meaning turned out in Deleuze to be the evacuation of the self. I observed that, under certain conditions, this reading appears to be analogous to Derrida's hyper-totalizing project that is inspired by Joyce (the "total exhaustion" functions then as a negative flipside of Derrida's attempt to account for a totality).

The third reading of Beckett I considered, that of Badiou, seems to permit one to distinguish in Beckett's negative gesture between two quite separate stakes. Beckett's terms "unsaying" and "ill-saying" can no longer be used interchangeably since subtraction and failure become two independent pursuits. Whereas "unsaying" (subtraction) should be seen as a gesture of epoch (a gesture proper to thinking), the "ill-saying" ("failure") is a poetic gesture of artistic production. In other words, the negativity in question is not to be seen as an evacuation of any sort: the thinking subject asserts itself through procedures of subtraction (reduction to the essential), and (innovative) meaning comes to be through artistic ill-saying. It need not be said that this is the most affirmative of the existing readings of Beckett – but it is also the

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<sup>690</sup> Badiou, *On Beckett*, 90, emphasis mine.

<sup>691</sup> Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game. A Reading of Beckett's Endgame," 161.

one in which Beckett's own desire to elude the position of sovereignty dictated by language and by the position of the author is completely ignored.

I then proposed three points at which Beckett and Derrida might meet, three singular transactions. I chose these three not only because they were the most opportune meeting points for these two authors in particular, considering their interests and intellectual itinerary. More importantly, these three points denote three foci through which contemporary philosophy looks at literature: its unique signature, the conditions of its appearing for us *as such* (variously addressed as the phenomenality, authority or autonomy<sup>692</sup> of the literary object) and the status of its language.

The first of them was the subjective signature, or what Derrida in the footsteps of Artaud calls "the subjectile." This reading seemed to bring the two authors as close together as they could ever be -- but separated still by the sheer impenetrability of the "subjectilian wall" in Beckett that once again confirmed the latter's disbelief in the possibility of a singular institutive event. However, it would be too simple to conclude that the impenetrability of the subjectile in Beckett is univocal. The event of the signature in *The Unnamable* that, as we have seen, fails to take place, is described as passing over a limit or a threshold (the "threshold of my story") and also as an aporia ("aporia pure and simple").<sup>693</sup> Analogously to the singular that in disappearing produces its own law, aporia, even though it "can never be endured as such" remains, in virtue of some "contaminating contraband," "the law of all decisions."<sup>694</sup> Derrida's deconstruction, if we rely on his own statement, is located in this partition ("[d]econstruction is explicitly defined as a certain aporetic experience of the impossible"<sup>695</sup>). Beckett's *Unnamable*, evoking "aporia" in its opening sentences and insisting that a similar status of impossibility be granted to it ("I too have the right to be shown impossible") is a discourse on this partition. This renders problematic my reading of the impossibility of penetrating the "wooden door" of words, of death, of "the threshold of my story." After all, even though the *Unnamable* describes his

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<sup>692</sup> So in Cavell: "in modernist arts the achievement of the autonomy of the object is a problem -- the artistic problem. Autonomy is no longer provided by the conventions of an art (...) nor is it furthered by any position the artist can adopt, towards anything but his art." Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game. A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*," 116.

<sup>693</sup> In his essay under the same title (*Aporias*) Derrida devotes a substantial passage to link the rhetoric of partitions to the question of the aporia. Derrida, *Aporias*, 15. The rhetoric of partitions includes the singular ("the birth date that only happens by effacing itself" discussed in *the Shibboleth*).

<sup>694</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, 78-79.

<sup>695</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, 15; and Derrida, *Psyché; Invention de l'autre*, 27.

enterprise as impossible, this does not result in silence: the “contaminating contraband” keeps seeping through. The threshold is shown to be impassable but nevertheless the phenomenal authority of the literary work establishes itself precisely as a function of this impassable threshold.

In my analysis of the *Unnamable* I noted that, just like in Derrida’s reading of Artaud, the subjectile stands at the same time for the subject-producing gesture of artistic production as for what happens to the medium of that production: the point in which the hand touches (“pierces”) the canvas. I have retraced the rhetoric of partitions in Beckett’s *Unnamable*: the “tympanum,” “membrane,” the “doors,” and “windows.” What transpired was that the “I” and the “words” (i.e., the linguistic “canvas”) function within this rhetoric in exactly the same way. At first it is “me” who has to traverse the doors of my story (or in the words of the letter to Axel Kaun, it is me who has to pierce the words) – but at the same time I am this ossified partition myself (at first a membrane, a tympanum, later a (trap)door fallen above the hangman.) And not without reason: the subjectile is precisely this coincidence of the subject and the work. Consequently, if I am charged with the task of “perforating” language (“the words”) then perforating “myself” is a part of this task. That which must be pierced is at the same time that which must do the piercing. (Or, putting it in semi-Beckettian vocabulary, “there is nothing to pierce with” and yet it must take place). Badiou called this acrobatic attempt at self-piercing, in which the “subjectile” and language are one, a “torsion du sujet,” a torsion of the subject (represented literally in *How It Is* by the bizarre image of “that extreme eastern sage” who grew nails through the palms of his clenched fists<sup>696</sup>). This self-aggressive gesture in Beckett is one of the many in which the subject is turning both against and upon, towards itself. That is the meaning of Beckett’s *Company*: one is company to oneself but never without prostheses in the form of stories, characters, and words. In this sense Beckett’s work is all about closing the circuit.

The claim here is not only that one is company to oneself. The other part of it is that literature is “for company.” Literature performs the prosthetic function of closing the circuit (stories told for company, for comfort, like the one about the heroic Joe Breen in “The Calmative”<sup>697</sup>). In the end, unless one finds a way to escape the

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<sup>696</sup> Beckett, *How it is*, 53.

<sup>697</sup> Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose*, 64.

position of mastery one always ends up, in the closing words of *Company*, "as you always were. Alone."<sup>698</sup>

Beckett alternates between the acknowledgment of his sovereign position as writer and as language user and the desire for release from this sovereignty (in silence, forgetting, the loss of self). Deleuze's interpretation of Beckett via "exhaustion" is perhaps most successful in presenting itself as a limit case in this choice: the supreme sovereignty through the supreme loss of sovereignty.

### ***Epilogue: Without Writing***

In a recent text<sup>699</sup> Derrida has quite explicitly identified writing, including his own, with a desire for mastery: "writing dreams of sovereignty, writing is cruel, murderous (...). A crime against humanity, the genocide itself, and the crime against *generation*."<sup>700</sup> This "silent lesson" (that he draws from his rereading of Jacques Trilling's book on Joyce) makes Derrida contemplate a certain "nostalgia of retreat," in the shape of a dream of another writing:

to begin to love life, to know birth. Including my own (...). A new rule of life: to breathe without writing, from now on, to breathe beyond writing. (...) [W]ithout writing, without phrase, without murder. (...) Beyond the instinct of death, beyond the instinct of power and mastery. Writing without writing. Another writing, the other of writing, the altered writing, the one that has always traversed mine in silence.<sup>701</sup>

These words are not simply recalling, as so often in Derrida, the gesture of negative theology (e.g. in the expression "writing without writing"). The "new rule of life" evoked here is "to breathe without writing." Would it be a reappraisal of Derrida's

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<sup>698</sup> Beckett, "Company," 46.

<sup>699</sup> Derrida, "La Veilleuse," 7-32.

<sup>700</sup> "[L]écriture rêve de souveraineté, l'écriture est *cruelle*, meurtrière (...) Le crime contre l'humanité, le génocide même commencent là, et le crime contre la generation." Derrida, "La Veilleuse," 31.

<sup>701</sup> "[C]ommencer enfin à aimer la vie, à savoir sa naissance. Entre autres la mienne (...). Nouvelle règle de vie: respirer sans écriture, désormais, souffler au-delà de l'écriture. (...) Sans écriture, sans phrase, sans meurtre. (...) Au-delà de la pulsion de mort, de toute pulsion de pouvoir et de maîtrise. Écriture sans écriture. L'autre écriture, l'autre de l'écriture aussi, l'écriture altérée, celle qui a toujours travaillé la mienne en silence." Derrida,

reading of Husserl in *La voix et le phenomene*, the essay that for the first time brought Derrida fame and recognition? Derrida has gone to great length in that essay to show that Husserl, in order to protect the unmediated access to the ideality of meaning privileges voice – voice that, *as breath*, “simulates” life and presence -- to the disadvantage of writing. And now, thirty-five years later Derrida announces his desire to “breathe without writing” – “beyond the instinct of death, beyond the instinct of power and mastery.” This overtly recapitulatory reference to the beginning of Derrida’s career as a philosopher ends with a parenthesis: “signé Ulysse” that announces Derrida’s return to the point of origin, the end of a circular journey that started with Husserl.

In the context of this essay about the desire and the impossibility to release oneself from one’s origin, one’s “mother,” by killing her (“matricide”), that poses an analogy, in psychoanalytic terms, between paternity and maternity, the return to Husserl is a return to the “mother.” The desire of matricide, attributed to Joyce (on the basis of the autobiographic motives in the opening pages of *Ulysses*) and via Joyce to writers in general (that’s where the title of Trilling’s book comes from, *James Joyce ou l’écriture matricide*) is interpreted by Derrida as a gesture of sovereignty. To kill one’s mother means to stop the possibility of birth, that is, to arrest time: Joyce, Derrida’s example, is reported to have wanted to be “father and son of his works.”<sup>702</sup> (Moran’s words in Beckett echo this desire, with a substantial subtraction, in which “the works” disappear: “I was my father and I was my son.”<sup>703</sup>)

Renouncing this gesture is perhaps the most explicit gesture Derrida has ever made towards Beckett: “beyond power and mastery.”

On the other hand, this sheds light on Derrida’s old, inexplicit gesture towards Beckett. Without mentioning Beckett’s name Derrida inserts Molloy’s words in his *Glas*<sup>704</sup>:

I called her Mag, when I had to call her something. And I called her Mag because for me, without my knowing why, the letter g abolished the syllable Ma, and as it were spat on it, better than any other letter would have done. And at the same time I satisfied a deep and

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<sup>702</sup> “La Veilleuse,” 31-32.

<sup>702</sup> Derrida, “La Veilleuse,” 31.

<sup>703</sup> Beckett, *Trilogy*, 92.

doubtless unacknowledged need, the need to have a Ma, that is a mother, and to proclaim it, audibly. For before you say Mag you say ma, inevitably.

This quotation is accompanied by a reference to Fónagy who links the *g* sound to “the pharyngeal contraction that accompanies a refusal of nourishment” and to a “phantasy of the *vagina dentata*.” Suddenly in one gesture Derrida shows Beckett to be an accomplice, sharing with him the phantasm of matricide, in other words the phantasm of arresting time, of mastery or of sovereignty (just as much as they only a moment ago turned out to share the desire of non-violent, non-sovereign writing, writing “without matricide”).

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<sup>704</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1974), 231/258.

