



NORDIC IRISH STUDIES

Volume 11, Number 2, 2012

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SPECIAL ISSUE:

THE REST IS SILENCE

The Sounds of Silence: Samuel Beckett's Haunted Modernism

Maria Beville

This article will examine the haunting aspects of Samuel Beckett's literary Modernism, connecting the Gothic aesthetics of his prose writing to the author's philosophical concerns with language and silence. It will read Beckett's expression of existential anxieties as generated in and through a Gothic schema in his fiction which reveals important details about the relationship of the Gothic to the linguistic concerns of Modernism. Silence, in this context will be analysed as part of the deconstruction of an important binary of language and non-language, wherein Beckett's literary explorations ruminate on the possibility and impossibility of death and non-existence. Understood as a lack of speech, silence is paradoxical for the very reason that silence is language; an essential part of speech. In the Modernist context of reading identity and experience as linguistic, this paradox is both fearful and disturbing since silence and death consequently seem unattainable. Silence, in Beckett's prose is desired by his tired and frustrated textual characters. It also interrupts the flow of words and text in a haunting and deconstructive manner. Discussion of these ideas and how they are presented in the literature through Gothic forms will rely upon some ideas from psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories which affirm the ideas of the linguistic subject and the decentred self as they are functional in Beckett's literary philosophy.

When analysing the Gothic in relation to Modernist literature it is important to consider that in the broad context of literary history, the Gothic, like other fantastic forms was, and arguably still is, a marginalised body of writing that generally functions in the delineation of the limits of literature. Crossing the boundaries of what can and should be said, the Gothic is an excessive and often radical form and while it exists in its own right as a genre exploring the dark aspects of reality and identity, it also takes on a spectral presence in realist and other literature, functioning as a particularly apt form for dealings with dark and fearful themes. With the emergence of Modernism, and the movement in art away from overarching concepts of the real, the Gothic, as the literature of the unreal and the unconscious, can be seen to renegotiate its place in a move from the

marginal toward the literary mainstream. In the case of Irish literary Modernism, the Gothic acquired notable prominence in the occult aesthetics of W.B. Yeats and James Joyce.¹ Importantly, it can also be seen to take on an acute philosophical significance in the linguistic explorations of the prose work of Samuel Beckett.

The Gothic has been conceived quite accurately by David Punter as 'the literature of terror'.² In this sense terror is that sensation which is intrinsically connected to encounters with the 'unrepresentable': that awesome and unquantifiable manifestation of the sublime that reduces the subject to silence. The unrepresentable, while it is an important aspect of sublime experience, is also often contingent upon that which is socially deemed unspeakable, incomprehensible or taboo. The unrepresentable in Victorian Gothic was predominantly connected to the psychological, to the dark realm of the unconscious and its inaccessible fears and desires. The unrepresentable and its related fears in the case of Modernist Gothic, importantly emerge from the terror of language that drove the Modernist movement in art and literature: that unbearable silence of the vacuum of subjective expression in which all meaning and reality are dissolved. This terror of language is essentially an existential terror. There is an intrinsic ontological problem in the idea that it is impossible to communicate subjective experience and that as such, no homogenous truth or reality exists. This is explored significantly in the fragmented and haunted textual universe of Beckett's prose works where limitlessness, meaninglessness, and death in life are presented as symptoms of a lack of knowledge and a lack of 'self'.

The characters created by Beckett, particularly in his later prose writing, are non-essential, spectral beings who inhabit a protean world of confused memory and desire, whose search is never ending and futile but which continues because it must, epitomised in the repeated statement: 'I can't go on, I'll go on'.³ The ideas of poststructuralist theory are particularly relevant to this idea of the incessant need for language and text and the evanescent nature of silence. According to Jacques Derrida, silence is the origin, the source of all speaking [. . .] it is that which bears and haunts language, outside and against which alone language can emerge'.⁴ Silence is not necessarily the other of speech. Every word gains meaning through its relation to silence and so the binary of silence and speech/ language is necessarily one that moves toward a deconstruction. These deconstructive ideas relating to language and silence are also significant to Beckett's critique of ontology, as will be later outlined, and which is generated through the continuous recreation in his writing of disembodied voices that exist textually as everything, but otherwise as nothing. When this contem-

plation of ghostliness is analysed, it becomes apparent that Beckett's representation of existence in language illustrates a modern Gothic experience of haunting, entrapment and frustration.

Lacanian theory has established significant links between language and the creation of subjectivity reasoning that the self is a complex linguistic construct structured in the interplay of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. According to Lacan, the real is inaccessible and so subjectivity is artificial since language, '[t]he symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalisation of desire'.⁵ From this perspective, amid other concerns we can understand why the impossibility of silence, and consequently, our inability to escape language, is propounded by Beckett to be the central cause of the darkness and destruction of modernity. We cannot speak in a language that communicates any true meaning, and yet we cannot escape the chains of language which bind us to our subjectivity. This is expressed generally in Beckett's prose through his preoccupation with 'death' as it pervades the mind of the modern individual, which is linked emphatically to the failure of language to communicate introspective experience. Beckett's later prose works, which in their response to the terrifying threat of language embody Modernist aesthetic principles, raise issues of identity and knowledge in relation to a quest for silence. As Jean Paul Riquelme puts it, they 'invite us to know ourselves' in their spectrality, textuality and excessive minimalism.⁶ The terror of modernity (in the Gothic sense), is manifest explicitly in the textual worlds that Beckett's later prose presents and the intimate relationship of those worlds and inhabitants to silence and death.

Christopher Ricks mentions in his studies of Beckett that T.S. Eliot's definition of great simplicity in literature and art was 'the triumph of feeling and thought over the natural sin of language'. According to Ricks, Beckett continued the struggle to escape from language through art and saw the greatest simplicity in literature as 'the triumph over the original sin of being born'.⁷ Beckett's solipsistic view of modern existence expressed in his late prose works portrays a situation where existence is in itself a terrifying, Gothic experience. Graham Fraser identifies a series of ghosts that haunt his fiction noting that 'Beckett's ghostly, Gothic preoccupations pervade all his late texts', which he goes on to refer to as '[t]he late Beckettian Gothic'.⁸ In many modernist works – Eliot, Woolf, and Faulkner immediately come to mind, the dead can sometimes continue to speak, and we see that this is intrinsically linked to existentialist thought. 'What is existence?' and 'what is death?' are questions that consistently surface in modernist literature, and interestingly, the answers in Beckett's

works, particularly in the novellas (*First Love, The End, The Expelled, The Calmative*) and in his trilogy of novels (*Molloy, Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*) all ultimately return to the issues of language and silence. For Beckett's characters, or consciousnesses – as they do not seem to have anything distinctly characteristic about them, exist only as long as they speak. Silence is their death and this appears to be unattainable as they metamorphose into one another through linguistic association in the various novellas. They are disembodied protean souls; inconsistent, 'queer', and they inhabit a confused world of dark memories and unfulfilled desires.

As a feature of Gothic writing, the theme of disembodiment has notable existential aspects. The body, without the soul or self, is an intriguing concept that raises issues relating back to Cartesian dualism and more modern concerns with the construction of subjectivity through social systems such as language. In Beckett's writing, disembodiment echoes the problems raised by other disembodied characters from the Gothic; Frankenstein and perhaps also Dracula. However the Modernist twist on this recurring feature of Gothic literature presents the idea that without the body, the self is encapsulated in and created by language. In Beckett's stories incorporeal characters exist as lost souls. They are validated by the language that defines them, the inescapable text, and the physical 'reality' of the body is not essential to self or communication. This is often contrasted in his writing in his embodied characters whose bodily functions become the prime focus of their vacillating existence. This is almost an ironic inversion of the soulless bodies of Count Dracula's victims. While mesmerised, vampirised bodies achieve a wholly separate existence from their rational consciousness. They are effectively totally subsumed by desire. The altered or extra bodily existence of Dorian Gray, whose soul has been captured in a portrait and whose body exists contra-temporally is also a relevant parallel. All in all, the representation of the split between body and soul in Gothic literature to date has generally been a site of terror. Beckett's writing is no different as we are presented with a series of visceral beings whose subjective relationship to bodily existence is grotesque to say the least, while their interior or mental existence is a terrified and disturbed system of incessant signification. This approach seems to have mysterious origins in Platonic metaphysics, in which the soul and body are defined as distinct entities, the soul being privileged. However, with the advancement of philosophy and science toward the realms of existentialism, the concept takes on a whole new 'meaning' which is explored significantly in Beckett's writing.

The Unnamable is quite possibly the story that presents this idea most concisely. In the story, the narrative voice is present yet unnamable and

unknowable. It exists as a fragmented consciousness; plagued by repetition or words and inescapability from those words that define it. In this sense the Unnamable represents a modernist vision of the interior of modern man in an excessively bleak situation of epistemological uncertainty. Stripping away the physical trappings of reality, only words are left. In an impressionistic manner the idea is conveyed that modern existence; existence in language, is monstrous. In an attempt to awake from the nightmare of language, the narrative voice of the novellas 'dream[s] of silence'.⁹ In its expression of the desire for silence, which is essentially death, a Gothic dimension to its perceived reality emerges. It imagines 'the end' beyond words; beyond the reality of 'icy tumultuous streets, the terrifying faces, the noises that slash pierce, claw, bruise';¹⁰ beyond self: that 'vision of two burning eyes'.¹¹ Similarly, Molloy, earlier in the trilogy, no longer able to cope with these desires, contemplates self-murder (silence) on numerous occasions in his narrative but is betrayed by the sounds of approaching death: 'how often I was tempted to put an end to it, by cutting my throat. But I never succumbed. The noise betrayed me, I turned purple'.¹² His faith in life, if any, is a faith in silence; it is a faith in death, a hope for something beyond language. Jesus Christ, 'the word' is invoked consistently by Molloy who describes his own existence as a 'veritable Calvary' with 'no hope of crucifixion'.¹³ His hope for silence inverts the Christian tradition which is based on epistemological fulfilment and eternal life and as we see this becomes something of a Gothic motif in Beckett's philosophy.

The 'subversive', 'grotesque' and 'lewd' bodily descriptions that dominate Beckett's character's impressions of the physical, external world fasten his philosophy to a Gothic train of thought. Bodily desires and their negative associations in language arouse an obscure sense of terror that causes the reader to retract into the world of the mind. Passages on anal probing, bestiality, geriatric copulation, self-mutilation, regurgitation (the list could *go on*) function as techniques in defamiliarisation. The imaginative frenzy that subsequently overtakes the reader is a prelude to what in his late work could be called linguistic disruption. The terror that our existence in and through language is essentially limiting, absurd and chaotic is so expressed. We realise, like the disintegrating consciousness that occupies the stories whether as author, narrator or character, that language fails in presenting any comprehensive 'reality', of self or of the external bodily world, and so silence is impossible: we are destined to remain trapped and frustrated, isolated in a domain of futile but necessary expression.

The narrator of the novella *The Calmative* comments: 'It is not my wish to labour these antinomies, for we are needless to say in a skull'.¹⁴ This highlights the current of entrapment that haunts Beckett's work as a source of terror. The Cartesian angle of this statement is clear: we are first and foremost trapped in the subjective world of the mind and can never exist beyond it as it is our only 'certainty'. Secondly, we see an existentialist version of post-structuralism, for it is an entrapment horrifically located within the confines of text. This 'skull' is the subjective world of words, the words that create our memories, our desires and our identities. Along Derridean lines, the goal is to develop an awareness of the structures that create identity and values, but based on the re-imagining of an extra-textual existence, mutable, without boundaries where one can be content to believe everything and nothing and flourish on self-delusion. It is the paradoxical spectral existence of Mr Endon, in *Watt*, the man with whom it is impossible to communicate, whose engagement with external reality is random at best and indiscriminate at worst. Mr Endon is the character who has alienated himself in the system within which he inexorably strives for self-definition. Riquelme comments in relation to the Gothic dimensions of Beckett's writing, that 'in Beckett we encounter a textualising of the ghost and the threat, a linking of the ghost and the threat to language'.¹⁵ Mr Endon, for example, fails to make any distinct attempts at communication. When tested by Watt in an experimental chess game, he is found to have made arbitrary and random moves on the board. His existence is almost beyond language in the subjective sense and therefore beyond self-knowledge, and can be interpreted as spectral or shadowlike. It is based on his inscription in Watt's story. He is in a paradoxical condition of inescapable hesitation in that he has transcended subjective linguistic existence in the story, only to be trapped in the subjective world of text that is the story itself.

And so it is inevitable that we must look at the Beckettian universe as a textual universe. Ghostly voices spur the narrative forward, posthumous narrators such as the Unnamable and the central consciousness of *The Calmative* do not know who they are or when they died and their present existence in what Botting refers to as the 'darkly illuminating labyrinth of language',¹⁶ is in no uncertain terms Gothic. They persist in inhabiting the textual world for reasons frustratingly unknown to them and as a result anxiety, subversive sexuality, paranoia, violent thoughts and sublimated desire pervade their macabre imaginations. The already 'dead' voice of *The Calmative* tries to communicate from the grave. '[A]lone in [his] icy bed', he envisions the sounds of his own corpse in the process of decay. He waits for tissue to tear, for bones to crack and for 'great red lapses of the heart'.

Taking on necrophilic tendencies, the voice imagines 'the fornications with corpses' and the only escape from the horror of physical reality is to tell himself a story.¹⁷ In this sense words are a release from the horrific realities of the physical world. However, in a later story, the Unnamable, having achieved a further level of non-existence as a voice from the ashes of an urn, claims that his world is 'all words, there's nothing else'.¹⁸ In *The Unnamable*, apart from Gothic themes, reality disintegrates as it is created in the shape of the double rhythm of 'the Gothic plot'.¹⁹ Time is out of joint. Reality is texts and as such is timeless and unending, and this realisation causes the voice to become so terror stricken that he can do nothing but continue. A. Alvarez comments that:

[i]n *The Unnamable* the only real subject is the words themselves and the intolerable need to use them. But as the book progresses even the words lose their tenuous connection with reality . . . until there is only a smeared impression of a mind dilating and expanding, deliquescing in horror, fear and disgust around its own misery.²⁰

This type of work could appropriately be referred to as graveyard fiction, as thanatological concerns are expressed in terms of the mysterious, the inhuman and the unearthly. What is significant is that the disembodied voices with which we empathise as readers tell us from their peripheral perspective more about their fears, desires and anxieties through parapraxis than they do through direct language and imagery. This seems to demonstrate that their true terror, the terror of language is based around an 'infinite capacity for signification'.²¹ Their Derridean frustration with language in which 'words mean both too much and not enough',²² and in which volatile boundaries fail to define their communicative existence, confuses all interpretative parties even further. One could also take the approach that would conceive Beckett's linguistic experiments as something of a Derridean nightmare in which logocentrism has ironically lost all its power. Even Derrida, in his rejection of the violent hierarchies of the linguistic world could not avoid logocentrism in the establishment of his own philosophy as the theory itself, although it tries to avoid it is potentially another centre. In the Beckettian textual universe we are presented with a situation where no boundaries appear to exist. The Derridean conceptual paradise has become the equivalent of Dante's *Inferno*. After all, logocentrism is necessary in the creation of identity, in the affirmation of the boundaries of self and also in the definition of what it 'means' to be human'. Beckett's works, as '[c]ontemplations on linguistic suicide',²³ are therefore subtly terrifying and the ominous atmosphere that results continues to loom over his formless, ephemeral, illusive creations

and also over the imagination of the now disconcerted reader. David Pattie in his study of Beckett refers his mode of textual creation as the 'literature of self-erasure'²⁴ and from this point we see that not only is it erasing itself but it is doing so by progressing in a circular motion. The spiralling narrative which can never reach a centre has a thematic focus that is steadfastly shifting. Similarly, the characters who are driven to give us the narrative continuously shift position and seem to exist as the subjects of some greater linguistic entity: 'he who has neither body nor soul'.²⁵

David Watson described the Beckettian narrator as a shifting signifier with no essential self, based entirely on the concept of fabrication,²⁶ but it could also be thought of as a variation on the Proustian idea that the subject is constituted of a variety of different selves, or on the equally valid approach of modern psychology to multiple personality disorder. Either way, it is important to note that the landscape of the Beckettian universe exists only as it is described in the language of these 'shifting signifiers' and is therefore subject to their protean, transitory nature. Furthermore, however detailed the descriptions may be, they are the product of the chaotic imaginations of self-confessed liars. If nothing can be certain then nothing can be central – not even existence. This having been said, we can see that the ironic emptiness of the text make the dialogic potential of Beckett's work overwhelming. The darkness and confusion that results is the anarchy of a textual world that has lost its centre. Narration, by the time we reach *The Unnamable* is completely without structure, disintegrating before our eyes and expressing its own existence in subliminal terms to the reader, through '[a]n open ended process of echoes and reduplications'.²⁷

No voice left, nothing left but the core of murmurs, distant cries, quick now and try again with the words that remain, try what I don't know, I've forgotten, it doesn't matter, I never knew, to have them carry me into my story . . . perhaps it's a dream, all a dream, that would surprise me, I'll wake, in the silence, and never sleep again, it will be I, or dream, dream again dream of a silence, a dream silence, full of murmurs, I don't know, that's all words, never wake, all words, there's nothing else.²⁸

The terror and panic that the *Unnamable* expresses in this extract is a result of the anarchy outside of the structures of language. The cyclical, chiasmic repetition of the words 'nothing', 'murmurs', 'words', 'dream' and 'silence' express an impressionistic vision of the ambiguity in his distrust in language but it also shows us the great courage of his artistic endeavour.

Jean Yamaska Toyama took a similar approach to exploring the deconstructive aspects of Beckett's work, emphasising that as the entire narrative is composed of variation on a circle, Beckett's writing was based on a postmodern notion of the importance of decentring and repetition.²⁹ This is an accurate statement in light of the re-incarnative nature of Beckett's stories; each one emerging as the product of the previous narrative with the feigned appearance of being a new and different story only to return that same narrative via repeated plots and features. We soon realise that there are no beginnings and no endings; that the narrative is continuation. Molloy becomes Malone, Malone dies and emerges as the Unnamable, who tells us that he will 'go on' and continue to create more characters like Molloy, and so the cycle persists. We also see that the characters themselves are aware, on some level of this notion. Molloy for example, admits that he is no longer capable of general ideas, and like the other voices, exists subjectively in a private, grotesque reality set in 'monstrous, unified, circular time'.³⁰ It may be worthy to note that these concentric narrative circles of terrifying existence might be connected with the nine circles of Dante's *Inferno*, in much the same way as the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, in which we are presented with a series of abstract, grotesque, mutable modes of continued existence. In de Sade's work terror and horror alternate and effectively recreate the opening and closing of 'being' that Levinas speaks of,³¹ portraying the extremities of experience that the existent may enter into, in this case through sexual degradation and inhumanity. What is significant is that Beckett effects a similar movement from being to 'being' or from non-existence to existence as his terrified and desperate fictional voices, in their individual subjective realms of existence afford a sort of 'plurivocity' in the void or *Inferno* of language. They are therefore, hauntologically present, and their terror is illustrated unlike those of de Sade's novel in the most apathetic of manners.

However, as the narrative progresses this 'plurivocity' is reduced to the analogous murmurs of the marginalised; the insane vagrant who has been refused a voice in society, but whose voice is nonetheless loud and encompassing to the ear of the reader. The main function it seems is to give expression to a 'longing for oblivion'.³² According to Botting, the modern Gothic 'presents the dissolution of order meaning and identity in a play of signs images and texts'³³ and so Beckett's play can be seen as definitively Gothic; effectively deconstructing the accepted textual oppositions that define our existence and our identities, and also those of life and death. To Beckett's extra-visceral protagonists, death is a complex word with limitless meaning and associations, and we must pay attention to those associations that are repeated: physical, emotional and linguistic. The

subjective internal world of Molloy, Malone, the Unnamable and countless other meta-characters (characters imagined by imaginary characters), including A and C, Mahood and Worm, cannot be fully penetrated from within or without and so they can be interpreted as existing in a liminal world of linguistic reverie; but this reverie comes with its own terrors. As we read, we encounter their terrified retreat from obscurity, from being and not knowing, toward a futile struggle for self-determination. In terms of Levinasian understanding, this is a situation in which 'the I's – it is a futile attempt for closure which is always interrupted, deferred or failing'.³⁴

In place of the "I" that circulates in time, we posit the "I" as the very ferment of time in the present³⁵.

The return of the present to itself is the affirmation of the "I" already riveted to itself, already doubled up with a *self* [. . .]. From there results the essential ambiguity of the "I", it *is*, but remains unclassifiable as an object. It is neither a thing, nor a spiritual centre from which radiate acts of consciousness, given to the consciousness of a new "I" which would apprehend it in a new move of withdrawal.³⁶

In line with Levinas's theory it appears that the new volatile existence of Beckett's meta-characters is continuously haunted by its own rumbling, as it is aware of its own fictionality; its own uncontrollable changing identity in the world of face to face relationships.³⁷ We see this in high definition in Beckett's trilogy of novels where the narrative or 'protagonist' voice is clearly the invention of that of the previous piece. Both life and death are inscribed by narrative, and so a matter entirely of continued fictitiousness and recreation. The characters do not die, but merge into one another as each new character is formed in a new story. Death is therefore presented as something that is beyond language and unachievable and the expression of death, ironically, is a mere narrated silence in the form of a subsuming new character.

This condition is one so absurd that to consider the possibility of the Christian 'eternal life' is ultimately horrifying: 'Well Belaqua, it is a quick death, God help us all. It is not'³⁸ and so Beckett's character's aspirations remain oriented toward an end, a silence, as did Beckett's. Ricks writes: 'Beckett did not believe in providence and its designs, he being willing to go further than to be mildly grateful to it for not existing'.³⁹ This idea is expressed in Molloy's meditations: 'there's no use knowing you are gone, you are not, you are writhing yet, the hair is growing, the nails are growing, the entrails emptying [. . .]'.⁴⁰ This is another distinctly Gothic passage in the inscription of Molloy's existence and is reminiscent of the original

Gothic on Mary Shelley's terms.⁴¹ It is also, like Beckett's exploration of the subject, a promethean suspension of Theism. The promethean figures of Victor and his double: the creature, complete with fragmented body, can be appropriately set beside the Unnamable, who recalls '[t]he fact that Prometheus was delivered twenty nine thousand nine hundred and seventy years after having purged his offences' and is left feeling 'as cold as camphor'.⁴² He goes on to repress this fear by declaring that between him and 'that miscreant who mocked the gods', there is nothing in common,⁴³ yet he tells us that it was worth mentioning. There is in this an acknowledgement of religion. However, his languid distrust of the Christian teleological view of existence is again expressed as Malone dies and we remember the nurse who has a crucifix engraved on her one remaining tooth. As a sort of 'carnivalised satire',⁴⁴ in the Bakhtinian sense, we see that Beckett's fiction often operates as a Gothic expression of the need to subvert accepted 'realities', whether they be bound up in religion, education, psychology or language.

Beckett's confessed influences aside from Joyce and Proust were Swift, Dante and Byron and so we can see that his dark irony came from a long literary tradition. Dante for example presents his mythological hell 'as a parody or anti-image of the real world, seen most clearly in the dead's living on in an underworld while the living continue living in an upper world in homes built on foundations as opposed to a shell of a house or a conical cavity irrigated by subterranean rivers'.⁴⁵ In alluding to Dante's *Inferno*, Beckett is producing 'an inversion of an inversion' much akin to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The existence in the 'real' world is hellish, and the real world beyond that representation, if it exists at all, is referred to in carnivalesque and grotesque descriptions. This extends even as far as his metafictional references in which he describes his writing as no worse than to 'obliterate texts' [. . .] 'to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery',⁴⁶ and so can also be seen as a reflection of the Gothic mood of his works.

Many Modernists shared Beckett's derision toward our existence in language. Eliot is a notable example if we recall those frustrated lines from *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*: 'that is not what I meant at all! Not what I meant at all!' While Eliot, by comparison to Beckett, could be said to have maintained something of a more traditional approach, Eliot's poetics can be seen to uphold Beckett's pessimism toward modernity. In a sense, Beckett can be seen as accelerating Eliot's thought processes on the fall of language and the fall of man, but through the negation of metamodelling concepts of religious myth and prophesy. As the

Unnamable says: 'I say aporia without knowing what it means'.⁴⁷ The deconstruction of binaries such as truth and illusion, creator and created, life and death are central in this endeavour. We see that as the narrator feels that his narrative is 'all a pack of lies'⁴⁸ and his essence in the form of changing characters, Molloy, Moran, Malone, the Unnamable, Mahood and Worm, is a practice in the putting on of masks. Alvarez sees in this a cinematic quality in which faces dissolve into one another, Malone in particular existing 'not in his own right but as a mask Beckett can pick up and put down again as it suits him', allowing him to remain distant and impersonal.⁴⁹ From a Gothic perspective this is reminiscent of Wilde. I can offer that Gothic passage from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as Dorian has just encountered the image of his most evil self: '[his] imagination, made grotesque by terror, twisted and distorted as a living thing by pain danced like some foul puppet on a stand and grinned through moving masks'.⁵⁰

Thus our attention is drawn again to the psychoanalytic notion of our existence as a succession of 'selves' that we create, through language. These 'selves', once created, remain adrift in our consciousness, in a sort of purgatorial anticipation of resurfacing when necessary. This purgatorial orifice of the mind is what the Unnamable calls a talking 'cylinder', allusive to that rapturous locale of existence in *The Lost Ones* in which the inhabitants desperately search for their lost ones, the selves that have been absented to a place whose nature is never definitively revealed. This again alludes back to *The Unnamable*, in which the narrative voice tells us:

Unfortunately I am afraid, as always, of going on. For to go on means going from here, means finding me, losing me, vanishing and beginning again, a stranger fists, then little by little the same as always, in another place where I shall say I have always been, of which I shall know nothing.⁵¹

Parallel to this fear is the terror of living death. The binary of life and death, and the reversal of the two conditions of being and not being are echoed in Malone Dies:

All is ready. Except me. I am being given, if I may venture the expression, birth to, into death, such is my impression. The feet are clear already of the cunt of existence. Favourable presentation I trust. My head will be the last to die.⁵²

For an existentialist like Beckett, life is death as a work in progress, expressed of course in the darkest and most ironic terms. Ihab Hassan in his study of Beckett declares that: 'when language has become a vacuum

epistemology must become parody'.⁵³ In his epistemological explorations Beckett parodied existence itself from its physical polarities of life and death and dislocated all of its conceptions: selves, realities, beliefs and roles. The reversal of the process of death emphasises the fine and volatile line that separates life from death, as it does being and non-being, knowing and not knowing; language and silence. To represent the 'unrepresentable' through language Beckett had to come 'as close to silence as a man can decently get while still remaining a practicing author'.⁵⁴ I would argue that he also had to approach the subject on Gothic terms. Malone's death illustrates this:

Lemuel is in charge, he raises the hatchet on which the blood will
 never dry, but not to hit anyone, he will not hit anyone anymore, he
 will not touch anyone anymore, either with it, or with it, or with it, or
 with it or with his hammer or with his stick or with his fist or in
 thought in dream I mean never he will never
 Or with his pencil or with his stick or
 Or light light I mean
 Never there he will never
 Never anything
 There
 Anymore⁵⁵

As he loses consciousness, the words lose meaning through repetition, the punctuation gradually fades, followed by the syntax and the voice disappears. Wittgenstein, in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* wrote: 'whereof one cannot speak, therefore one must be silent'.⁵⁶ This is Malone's death. The presence of 'meaning' is vague and ghostly. He is silent and the repetition ends temporarily.

The real irony in Beckett's work as an insurrection against language is that his absurd, meaningless stories (which in many cases feign the appearance of allegory) have deep significance on a philosophical level. Ricks notes that Beckett goes against Nietzsche's approach to art, that: '[w]e have art that we may not perish at the truth',⁵⁷ and instead courageously faces his terror, the ultimate truth: the end. Like Proust, Beckett expresses total disgust for 'our pernicious and incurable optimism',⁵⁸ and in this we can identify a sort of proto-postmodernist attitude. In linguistic terms his work functions to radically undermine logocentric theories of reality and subjectivity in what could aptly be called a Gothic discourse of deconstruction. Its textual hauntings portray a distinctly Gothic experience defined by struggles with language and silence. Reading Beckett's ghostly texts in this context emphasises the

importance of themes such as fear and death in the author's philosophy and serves to place his writing within the continuum of Gothic literature as it extends in and through the Modernist tradition, and the Irish Modernist tradition in particular.

*This article develops on ideas raised in a chapter of the book *Gothic Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* (Rodopi, 2009).

Notes and References

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