"In the beginning was the Pun"
Figures of Speech and Figures of Thought in Beckett's Novels and Plays

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Linguistic experiments fascinated Beckett from the days of his first narrative and poetic writings in English in the 1930s, when he was moving in the contemporary literary avant-garde circles and in the wake of James Joyce. This was the time when Beckett acquired his universe of themes, stylemes and models through the return to and the parodic use of tradition, together with the assimilation and subsequent rejection of his considerable breadth of culture.

We might say, extremely succinctly, that Beckett's whole output is marked by the progressive reduction and deliberate deconstruction of ontological, dramaturgical, narratological and linguistic categories, in order to express non-significance and, through the "less and less", nothingness, emptiness, "lessness".

Beckett moved in this direction out of fidelity to an aesthetic paradox which is at the root of his whole poetics: "To be an artist is to fail," he tells himself in the essay *Three Dialogues* (1949), a collection of his dialogues with the three painters Duthuit, Masson, Bram Van Welde. He continues by stating that

> the duty and the task of the artist... is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure a new term of relation, and an act which, unable to act, obliged to

act, he makes, an expressive act even if of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation.

For Beckett, the world of art is the world of failure. The painter, for example, is bound to fail, in the attempt to escape from the finite, to forget the unbearable presence of the object, to represent emptiness "because there is nothing to paint, and nothing to paint with". Although there is "nothing to express, nothing with which to express, no desire to express... no power to express", the artist has "the obligation to express".

Beckett often professed his lack of faith in language, which he considered not only incapable of recording the phenomenal data of exterior reality, but also unreliable, unsuited to say that which is beyond the conscious.

The central idea of Beckett's poetics is the relativity, the precariousness and the arbitrariness of language, the inadequacy of words. This is the reason why all his characters go through crises of expression and, from Belacqua Shuah onwards, seek security in clichés and quotations in foreign languages during their continuous, emphatic and, at the same time, aphasic attempts to recount themselves.

However, because of one of the many paradoxes in Beckett, lack of faith in language also becomes a challenge to language itself. A challenge that Beckett duplicates in the literary use of two languages, French and English, and in his translation of his own works. Self-translation represents an extension, a continuation of his game with language, of the excavatory operation, begun with the original, with the aim of getting words to reach increasingly pure sound effects (the "fundamental sounds"). The self-translated text thus becomes an expansion of the original text, a continuation of the "duty and task" of the writer.

In this respect, the testimony of the writer and philosopher E.M. Cioran, like Beckett, French by adoption and equally reserved and secretive, becomes significant:

Words, who shall have loved them more than him? They are his companions, his only support: he who has no certainty, we feel him to be secure amidst words... symbols of fragility turned into indestructible foundations.

(Translation is mine)

From complexity to simplicity, to essentiality, to the pure sound of the word that signifies only itself: this is the artistic path of a writer who, after the little, the less and less, tries, or rather is obliged to try, to express nothingness. This operation is conducted by Beckett on structure, form and genres, and involves language in its totality: grammar, syntax, lexis and figures of speech.

The prose of the early novels such as *More Pricks, Murphy* and *Watt* has a complex, elaborate syntactic structure where different linguistic registers overlap, where the lexis, perhaps in a parodic manner, includes technical terms from a whole range of disciplines (from philosophy to religion), archaisms or neologisms, erudite allusions accompanied by a taste for elaborate verbal games.

In his analysis of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as an open work whose meaning has the "richness of the cosmos", Umberto Eco states that:

The main instrument of this integral ambiguity is the pun, the calembour: where two or three or ten different roots combine in such a way that a single word becomes a network of meanings, each of which can encounter and relate to other centres of allusion, still open to new possibilities of interpretation.

(Translation is mine)

(It is worth remembering that Beckett had written a fine, exemplary critical essay on *Finnegans Wake* as early as 1929.)

For Beckett, too, the pun was an essential figure, often used for comic effect or as the opportunity for obscene allusions. In the title of a poem written in 1930, "Whoroscope",

the combination of two different terms, 'whore' and 'horoscope', and the allusion to different fields of reality join in a single sound. Similarly, the union of 'worst' and 'toward' gives the title *Worstward Ho* (1983, a piece of poetic prose) with a powerful intertextual allusion (*Worstward Ho*, in fact, reminds us of the titles of two 17th-century plays).

In the novel *Murphy* (1938), it is the narrator himself who not only explains the calembour contained in the name of the female protagonist Celia (si l'y a), but also puts forward the ironic theory, with a highly allusive parodic game, that *"in the beginning was the pun"*.

Very often, however, especially in the later works, the punning presents an inversion, a change in the rhetorical figure: from the already doubting formulation of the play on words in the distant Celia, Beckett now turns to the negative sign. Once again it is a title, *Not I*, of the astonishingly original dramatic monologue dated 1972, which offers a network of meanings in a single sound: "not I, note eye, no tie", where the richness of the cosmos is affirmed through its negation. At the same time, however, the negation seems to nullify the sound echoes, the ambiguity of the word, the possibility of multiplying its meanings, to the point of emptying it of all meaning. It is also a title which does not explain, which is not thematic; according to expressionist poetics, it is rather an element of emotion, and reproduces the instability, the panic, and the momentary disorder of emotion.

At this point, a brief word on Beckett's titles. Although titles in general are loquacious and say a great deal about the works they introduce, Beckett's titles have a special appeal and a particular quality which makes them immediately identifiable as belonging to him. From a grammatical point of view, they range widely: the verb phrase *Waiting for Godot*, the proper noun Murphy, a noun preceded by a demonstrative as in *That Time*, and with an increasingly marked ellipsis, the

unaccompanied noun of *Breath*, the indelicate *Fizzles*, or the powerful *Lessness*.

There are also titles with the status of rhetorical figures: the litotes of *Not I* or of *Act Without Words*, the oxymoron *Stirring Still*, the ambiguous deictic function of *That Time*. Elsewhere the meta-theatricality of the text is already revealed by the title, like in *Catastrophe*, alluding both to a tragic event and to the rhetorical term used to indicate the dramatic moment of the dénouement.

The tendency towards reduction and deliberate deconstruction mentioned before is also evident in the types of rhetorical figures, words and thoughts that Beckett uses very frequently.

Especially in his later prose, Beckett makes use of tropes based on the principle of the absence of the real referent, or of the unnamed object, such as metonymy and thus metaphor, or on the principle of negation, such as litotes. And the presence of a part, in the absence of the majority or the whole, typical of synecdoche, is the basis of the play *Not I*, where the only character on stage, in the form of a synecdoche, is an enormous mouth which keeps on speaking without interruption.

Among Beckett's favourite rhetorical figures there is the oxymoron, as well as metaphor, of course (we should not forget the statement in the essay *Proust* (1931) that "the world is apprehended metaphorically by the artist"). The oxymoron, according to the definition given by classical treatises on rhetoric, is "the ingenious union of discordant things", in which the contradictory terms that seem to be mutually exclusive are juxtaposed, thus producing a more powerful semantic result. Examples of oxymoron are the definition of Belacqua Shuah's slothful crises as "moving pauses" or the "strong weakness for oxymoron" displayed by the same character. Other examples, in the essay on Proust, are the "amabilis insania" or the "holder Wahnsinn" which is the inalienable condition of the artist.

Beckett's oxymoron, however, contains the worm of decomposition and disintegration which always operates from within. In *Proust* (1931), in fact, when he identifies the origin of Proustian comedy as the result of the sense of the "relative", Beckett provides a definition which is suspect, to say the least: "I think the phrase positive relativism is an oxymoron." Here Beckett, so ready to grasp the essence of this rhetorical figure, defines as oxymoron that which is and remains contradictio in adiecto, in that the two contradictory terms do not combine to give rise to the semantic enrichment that is characteristic of this rhetorical figure, but remain opposed, deliberately contradictory, paralysed in immobility.

The short circuit of meaning, as found in the oxymoron understood in this way, is the source of Beckett's comedy. "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," we hear in *Endgame*: it is a peculiar sort of laugh, that which Beckett defines in the novel *Watt* as "mode of ululation,... mirthless laugh", and "risus purus, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the laugh that laughs at what is unhappy."

If, in a philosophical vision contemplating the unity of the individual, the oxymoron, Giordano Bruno's *coincidentia oppositorum*, is positive and reassuring, in the divided and fragmentary universe that Beckett has created, the oxymoron produces disturbing and alienating images. It does therefore provoke an arrest of the flow of information, a short circuit. The same happens in the case of all the figurae per adiectionem, the figures of repetition (*repetitio, geminatio, anaphora, enumeratio*), which Beckett often uses with the function of blocking meaning, of non-meaning, of deluding all expectation of meaning, thus causing an effect of total alienation.

This alienation is caused by the apparently absurd affirmations, contrary to common sense, expressed by the logical figure of paradox, constructed precisely in the form of oxymoron.

The characters (in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, etc.) also appear in couples which suggest the union of opposites. They are completely different and suggest the split within the individual into body and mind, for example, between mobility and immobility. Each couple seems to function as a unit, an indivisible monad. But the tension between unity and duality often becomes unbearable. One example is the conclusion of *Endgame*, where the couple Hamm and Clov remain united and separate at the same time, one sitting on his wheelchair and the other ready for a journey that will never take place.

It is the characters, in particular, who undergo a massive process of reduction and disintegration. Beckett's characters, increasingly impotent, divided between body and mind, old and suffering from loss of memory, with no past and no future, are represented as more and more uncertain of their own identity: having lost all the categories of subjectivity (knowledge, will, power), they no longer have even the possibility of saying I. The loss of the personal pronoun I, replaced by You or He or She, establishes that the Ego has exploded into many different particles, and that the individual tries in vain to rejoin the disiecta membra. The later monologues are paradoxically spoken by a voice outside the character who tells the character the story of his life (see *Company, All That Strange Away*). The elliptical, fragmentary, non-story story resembles Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a "Heap of broken images" reconstructed in a perfect, geometric symmetry.

The late work *Worstward Ho* is entirely founded on the figure of oxymoron and repetition: iterated contradictions in which the poles remain such, without any solution. To go forward is to go backward, to say is to unsay: "Same thing. Same nothing. Same all but nothing."

There are no characters here, but only words, words that dialogue among themselves in a dense polyphonic counterpoint where sound is the only producer of meaning and of sensorial

emotion, even if the words are "said, so-said, un-said, mis-said".

There is a move, in Beckett's works, towards elliptical, fragmentary communication which will very soon begin to reflect the uncertainty and the stumbling of words: a form of prose in which the sentences are untied by full-stops, stuck together by commas. The paratactic movement tends over time to become total, to abandon the hypotactic movement of the early prose, which is richer in adverbial cohesion.

In *Worstward Ho*, for instance:

> Not to know what the words it says say. Says? Secretes:
> Say better worse secretes. What is the words it secretes
> says. What the so-said void.

Repetition, extension, the smallest variation of sound expand the limits of the word, which no longer conveys meanings, no longer recounts stories, but says, mis-says only itself, "for want of worser worst", and the word is "Unmoreable unlessable unworseable evermost almost void".

It is a progression/regression to the very origin of language, a language that is collapsing, on itself, towards its centre where language encounters the limits of disarticulation, to re-articulate itself in the primary form of stutter and of poetry. Having reached the moment of birth, where the mental associations structuring thought are formed, phonic associations are experimented as if new: their articulation is tested, their resonance reinvented, tentatively, through the repetition, the iteration and the variation of sounds, with the rhythm of a heartbeat, in search of the *Comment dire*, of *what is the word* (1989):

folie-	*Folly-*
folie que de-	*folly for to-*
que de-	*for to-*
....	*what is the word-*

comment dire-	*folly from this-*
ceci	*all this-*
ce ceci-	*folly from all this-*
ceci-ci	*given*
tout ce ceci ci-	*folly given all this-*
folie donné	*tout ce-seeing-*
vu-	*folly seeing all this-*
folie vu tout ce ceci-ci que de	*this-*
comment dire-	*what is the word-*

It is a stutter that has great linguistic and poetic power. According to G. Deleuze, it is a creating stutter placing language in perpetual unbalance.

The continuous iterations – as a desire for closure, but also for an opening or a shift of meaning (this is clear in the dialogues, in particular in *Waiting for Godot*) are the evident symptom of the obligation to repeat, the final, unbearable condition left to the character.

It is a language created out of the repetition of lexemes, and expanded in the addition of lexemes: it starts from a centre and extends into a network of combinations in order to saturate the void, to negate the lack, to underline that there is nothing to express, except the obligation to express. And yet, the wonderous marvel for the birth of words!

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