

## The Mode of Enunciation in Beckett's Plays

### *O modo de enunciação nas peças de Beckett*

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the question of language and its mode of enunciation as it is worked out as something that permeates the construction of the characters in Samuel Beckett's three main plays: *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days* and *Endgame*. It therefore resorts to the analysis of language as containing the approach of the Other that can be understood as the unconscious. Authors such as Theodor W. Adorno and Michael Worton are addressed as they examine the philosophical aspects of the plays and the intersections between nonverbal language and a silent reading of them. The dilemmas of the characters in the three plays, similar to those of modern and contemporary individuals, are analyzed in the context in which the Theatre of the Absurd is inserted. It concludes that Beckett's use of language reflects new identities that are being formed as it questions reality in its engagement with discourse and the present.

**Keywords:** Beckett; language; mode of enunciation; character; interpretation.

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa a questão da linguagem e seu modo de enunciação, conforme é trabalhada como algo que perpassa a construção dos personagens nas três principais peças de Samuel Beckett: *Esperando Godot*, *Dias Felizes* e *Fim de Partida*. Para isso, recorre à análise da linguagem como contendo o elemento do Outro que pode ser compreendido enquanto o inconsciente. Autores como Theodor W. Adorno e Michael Worton são abordados ao examinarem os aspectos filosóficos das peças e as interseções entre a linguagem não verbal e uma leitura silenciosa delas. Os dilemas dos personagens nessas três peças, semelhante aos dos indivíduos modernos e contemporâneos, são analisados no contexto em que se insere o Teatro do Absurdo. Conclui-se com isso que o uso da linguagem em Beckett reflete novas identidades que estão se formando ao questionar a realidade no seu engajamento com o discurso e o presente.

**Palavras-chaves:** Beckett; linguagem; modo de enunciação; personagem; interpretação.

## The Representation of the Modern Individual in Beckett's Plays

Beckett's theatre represents the existence of modern human beings as something permeated by verbal language and nonverbal communication in its crudest form. The human capacity to acquire and vocalize language is always confronted with the impossibility to say or express everything we want, ranging from our thoughts and desires to our most intimate feelings. In light of this incapacity for a full communication, the attempts by the characters to deal with and compensate this setback in his plays are usually in vain. Likewise, human finitude as dictated by the passage of time and the limit of death is circumscribed by the impossibility of knowing or describing an experience that refuses to be verbalized beforehand and our endeavors to come to grips with it.

Several authors, among them Adorno (2001), Greenblatt (2006) and Worton (2010) have drawn attention to what they call the predicament of language in Beckett's theatre. Focusing on the excruciating centrality of this specific confrontation carried out in his main plays of the crisis of conventions in 20th century dramatic writing they point, by extension, to the question of the meaning of language as such. The word "predicament" in English has the weight of a painful and systematic effort and appears not by chance in Beckett's aesthetic writings: it has its own history and several occurrences in his essays on painting and the situation of the modern artist, involving the observation of a rupture between subject and object contemporary with the vanguard movements at the beginning of the 20th century, and the specifications of a personal poetics of response, paradoxical and full of impasses, to this state of affairs.

This article analyses the modes of enunciation (Foucault, 1972) of three of his plays: *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days* and *Endgame*. The mode of enunciation, from the perspective of discourse analysis, consists of ordering and organizing linguistic categories in order to elucidate the point of view of the enunciating subject in relation to what is being said by him or her, what the other says and his or her interlocutor.

The *mise en scène* in Beckett's plays hinges on the comic and moving aspect of our existence as something that, in essence, is devoid of any *a priori* meaning. It is only by living, thinking, speaking and making different kinds of association that it can be created. Therefore, as the audience we watch his plays enthralled inasmuch as language collapses before us forcing ourselves

to search for and confer meaning to words and utterances which may at times be empty signifiers or hide encrypted meanings. Similar feelings may be experienced by the readers. If for some ancient civilizations language was conceived as a given fact that did not need to be questioned, for the modern and contemporary individuals of our era it is always something that should be interrogated and put in check.

Just as in Beckett's novels, there is a shift in the axis of the narrative focus, in his plays the characters speak from an external perspective and, by sharing the point of view of outcasts and outsiders are not bound by social ties and expectations. They are at the same time strong and vulnerable, which confers them more freedom to express their own thoughts without worrying about what others may think. Having been relegated to the fringes of society, most of them suffer from a social disadvantage that makes them feel more insecure and hesitant. This can be clearly noticed in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, as we shall examine further on. Therefore, they often act aggressively and project their insecurities on others in order to compensate their own shortcomings. They also make free use of language, which is not censored by their consciousness.

Considering Beckett's will that his theatre be read as a text, we should bear in mind that "whenever directors and critics asked for explanations of Godot, he both side-stepped their questions and revealed his distrust of any kind of exegesis" (Worton, 2010, p. 67). By dealing with the question of language, the unconscious and human finitude, as well as the lack of meaning in life and the concept of nothingness, it reflects feelings of isolation, loneliness and a sentiment of loss and alienation, as well as a pain that assails the individuals of the last centenary and this one. Therefore, it could be considered even more relevant nowadays as it dialogues with and reverberates in our own century, which is considerably more fraught with such drawbacks.

The discursive consistency that makes it possible for us to follow a character's thought processes and which is so often presented to us by literature is turned upside down by Beckett. In this way, he is able to bring out the contradictions and conflicting feelings, as well as longings and cravings, which are important elements of modern and contemporary human beings. He also makes use of new literary expressions that break away from formal linguistic constructions, thus creating new linguistic facts that invite us to

think in a different way. Writing about *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Worton argues that,

Beckett's first two published plays constitute a crux, a pivotal moment in the development of modern Western theatre. In refusing both the psychological realism of Chekhov, Ibsen and Strindberg and the pure theatricality of the body advocated by Artaud, they stand as significant transitional works as well as major works in themselves. The central problem they pose is what language can and cannot do. Language is no longer presented as a vehicle for direct communication or as a screen through which one can see darkly the psychic movements of a character. Rather it is used in all its grammatical, syntactic and – especially – intertextual force to make the reader/spectator aware of how much we depend on language and of how much we need to be wary of the codifications that language imposes on us (Worton, 2010, p. 68).

Beckett's plays are full of intertextuality and intratextuality. The first term corresponds to quotations and allusions to passages in the work of other writers, such as Shakespeare and Dante, for instance. The latter refers to citations and references to portions extracted from his own work, such as when one of his plays contains a passage from another of his plays, thus creating an inner dialogue. These stylistic resources make his text richer and still more instigating to read. In the same way, his plays also become more entertaining and pleasant to watch by those who can recognize these literary references.

One example of intertextuality is a phrase repeatedly uttered by Willie, the male character in *Happy Days*: "Fear no more the heat o' the sun" or just its abbreviated form "Fear no more". This is a direct reference to the lines sung by Guiderius and Argirargus, the sons of Cymbeline, over the recently deceased forms of Cloten and Fidele. It appears in Act IV, Scene 2 of *Cymbeline*, which is a play written by Shakespeare. Here 'the heat of the sun' represents death and 'fear no more' stands for a more positive side or optimistic perspective on death as something that ends the hardships and suffering of life that human beings can be subjected to.

Since death is a phenomenon that affects all human beings, it is interesting to note that in the more than 300 years that separate these two authors many things may have changed in the perception and traditions regarding the end of life. The individuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century probably did

not have the same conception of death as those of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Likewise, the way we fear and deal with it nowadays may not be the same as in Shakespeare or Beckett's time.

It is interesting to bear in mind that Shakespeare wrote at the beginning of the Modern Era, and represents the transition from the European Middle Ages mentality and values to the Renaissance and Elizabethan perception of the world. Moreover, Shakespeare wrote in Early Modern English whereas Beckett wrote in Late Modern English. Writing about intertextuality in *Happy Days* and *Endgame*, Watt states that,

...while Winnie deliberately, almost obsessively, searches her internal archive for quotations from Shakespeare, Milton, and popular songs, Hamm's allusion to *The Tempest* seems to emerge from the same region into which Prospero's actors melt: "thin air". The difference, given distinctions Beckett draws in *Proust*, is between a kind of habitual, entirely voluntary process and the "miracle" of "involuntary" memory (Watt, 2011, p. 31).

Considering that drama deals with important subjects such as time, finitude, hope, affection and memory, among others, it is precisely in the unique rapport between the audience and the actors that unconscious feelings and almost forgotten recollections can surface. Thus, the stage might serve as a space of transference through which this happens. In this way, we may have insights and access to intimate feelings and thoughts that in a more conscious or rational way would be more difficult to be perceived or understood. This is certainly something that both Shakespeare and Beckett as playwrights were able to do with mastery.

## **Beckett and the Question of Language**

Even though theories about language can vary considerably and numerous thinkers have dwelt on that subject and its ramifications extensively, the intention here is not to fix it on a concept or dissect its very own being. Instead of that, the aim of this article is to analyze how language is used in the construction of the characters in Beckett's plays and as a means to something else, which could correspond to what in psychoanalytic terms is described as that other scene: the unconscious. As Foucault puts it,

... at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the law of discourse having been detached from representation, the being of language became, as it were, fragmented; but they became inevitable when, with Nietzsche, and Mallarmé, thought was brought back, and violently so, towards language itself, towards its unique and difficult being. The whole curiosity of our thought now resides in the question: What is language, how can we find a way round it in order to make it appear in itself, in all its plenitude? In a sense, this question takes up from those other questions that, in the nineteenth century, were concerned with life or labour (Foucault, 1994, p. 306).

Although verbal language is one of the most efficient ways of conveying ideas and emotions, it also may fall short of it at times, giving way to other means of communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, body language and meaningful silence. Since verbal language is not able to express everything we feel and think whenever we use it there is usually something below, such as the *sotto voce* of our assertions, and beyond what we say, as when a word refers to something else or masks other meanings.

Beckett's plays entangle us precisely in what blocks and, at the same time, liberates us as human beings: language. If in Shakespeare, one of the greatest exponents of the Modern Age, the utilization of language follows more formal parameters of attaining an end, in Beckett it is, at once, form and content, means and end *tout court*.

This is the equivalent of saying that both what is written and said, as well as the form, place and speaker of the enunciation must be taken as important constitutional elements of a statement. Despite the fact that puns and wordplays are abundant in both Beckett and Shakespeare, the former condenses more than one meaning in words and phrasal verbs that reflect the impasses and paradigms, goings and comings, of the human beings in the contemporary era.

In order to better understand Beckett's innovative esthetic, a passage from Rosenfield is elucidative here,

The theater of Beckett (which also opens up to a silent reading and, sometimes, just to this – for example *Le Dépeupleur*) evidences in a similar manner the formal game. He shows the existential depth that daily formulas, completely empty gestures or conventional habits may acquire. The absurd and immobile appearance of the Beckettian scene is effectively pure appearance, because what

one sees has to be read literally. The Beckettian scene is no longer representation of something, but is given as a text: the sand that rises slowly up to the neck of the old lady redoubles the significance of the repetition of words and formulas used – it is the sand of the hourglass that announces (literally) the end of the “Oh, les beaux jours!” (Rosenfield, 1989, p. 95, translation mine).

This raises questions on whether appearance should be taken as a reality in itself and, also, if reality is not just an entanglement of appearances, that is, something we cannot utterly apprehend and is given to us in the form of phenomena. In other words, can we really know someone or just what comes to us in the form of attitudes and behavior that are almost impenetrable regarding their inner reasons and motivations? Can we know all the mental processes that make a person utter this or that sentence or act in one way or another? And, finally, is not the sexual act a somehow frustrated attempt to probe the innermost mysteries of another person that we can never completely achieve?

Language in Beckett appears as a signifier of the “Other”, that is, of something that is beyond and below the mere meaning that refers to something concrete and specific, such as would be found in an obvious and simple relationship between signified and signifier. In this sense, it is relevant to bear in mind Foucault’s definition of language as elaborated in his book *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972),

Language always seems to be inhabited by the other, the elsewhere, the distant; it is hollowed by absence. Is it not the locus in which something other than itself appears, does not its own existence seem to be dissipated in this function? But if one wishes to describe the enunciative level, one must consider that existence itself; question language, not in the direction to which it refers, but in the dimension that gives it; ignore its power to designate, to name, to show, to reveal, to be the place of meaning or truth, and, instead, turn one’s attention to the moment – which is at once solidified, caught up in the play of the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’ – that determines its unique and limited existence (Foucault, 1972, p. 118).

This passage deals with the fact that whenever we speak or write something we choose one word or set of words in detriment of another. This choice of words may reflect different ways of thinking and presenting

ourselves to others or characterizing the world or things around us. This relates to Beckett's plays inasmuch as his characters make use of words and sentences that are mostly unfiltered by a state of consciousness. They spring forth with practically no censure and situate themselves in an intermediate state between conscience and the unconscious, willingness and helplessness. Here it is pertinent to focus on the issue of the incompleteness of discourse, which will never be able to encompass and reproduce the whole reality. It can only manage to reflect part of it and give it new meanings to the extent that it is being reflected. In this perspective, language and discourse reflect and determine reality, which would not be the same without them. As Greenblatt argues,

Beckett focuses his work on fundamental questions of existence and nonexistence, the mind and the body, the self as known from within and as seen from the outside or in retrospect. Joyce's artistic integrity and stream-of-consciousness technique influenced him, but the minimalism of Beckett's plays and fiction contrast with the maximalism of Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* (Greenblatt, 2006, p. 2661).

If language crumbles as something contingent in Beckett's long plays (*Endgame*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days* and *Krapp's Last Tape*) it reflects, such as it is, the inevitability of death, the passage of time and the fragmentation and contradictions of the contemporary subject. Meaning is given through the play of the signifiers, and not previously. Nevertheless, it becomes evident that language, be it verbal or body language, is necessary as the only means of communication among human beings.

According to Dukes, Beckett relinquishes with conventional concepts of plot, character and scene, focusing mainly on the experience of the drama in itself. He argues that,

Beckett strips away all that is inessential on the basis that a play is an event (or a non-event) that happens in a theatre in front of a live audience and that its purpose is not to have a 'meaning' but to provide an 'experience'. If the experience is sufficiently compelling to hold an audience then the audience itself will generate the meaning (Dukes, 2004, p. 87).

This idea is more fully elaborated by Adorno in his essay “*Trying to Understand Endgame*” when he states, about Beckett’s drama, that “not meaning anything becomes the only meaning” (Adorno, 2001, p. 137). All these considerations reflect on a distinct approach to drama and literature as well as the experience of language itself. Beckett introduces a completely new esthetic that transcends traditional concepts of beauty and order. Therefore, he forces the readers and spectators to assume a different position in relation to life: an attitude at the same time more active and critical. As Esslin puts it,

Beckett’s plays lack plot even more completely than other works of the Theatre of the Absurd. Instead of a linear development, they present their author’s intuition of the human condition by a method that is essentially polyphonic; they confront their audience with an organized structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other and that must be apprehended in their totality, rather like the different themes in a symphony, which gain meaning by their simultaneous interaction (Esslin, 1961, p. 13).

His literary fortune consists precisely in bringing to light the unexpected movements of the soul and the contradictions that lurk in apparently meaningless everyday acts. He is also able to condense in a few words a range of hues and possible meanings and readings. Therefore, his work reaches poetic force through a careful and very well elaborated subversion of predetermined values and ideas.

Beckett subverts the Cartesian idea that “I think, therefore I exist” by “I feel, therefore I am”. Having this in mind, he echoes the words of Hamlet “To be or not to be, that is the question” (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 688) in his work and his characters can only exist through being (which presupposes feelings and emotions). For him, thought occurs through feelings and an intuition of reality that transcends a pure logical reasoning and resembles more the universe of dreams and insights. Prospero’s famous lines “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep” (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 1154) is elucidative of this kind of approach to reality and shows how people (among other things) are the backdrop for dreams and unconscious projections.

In this sense, a comment by Paul Davies becomes relevant and reinforces some of the previous ideas,

Samuel Beckett's work has extended the possibilities of drama and fiction in unprecedented ways, bringing to the theatre and the novel an acute awareness of the absurdity of human existence – our desperate search for meaning, our individual isolation, and the gulf between our desires and the language in which they find expression (Davies, 2001, p. 1).

In Beckett's plays the plot is never something with a defined beginning, middle and an end. It is rather something that starts in the middle of a story, like the first scene of the first act in *Macbeth* which opens up in the middle of a dialogue between three witches. It is similar to our existence as human beings: we come to this world with a predefined structure: a name and surname, a given family and into an environment that has already been constituted and a world that is governed by language. Similarly, the scenes in his plays are also reminiscent of our own real life scenes with the people who enter and leave them in our lives, marking us or not. The background is usually the natural elements in their most simple form.

### **The Construction of the Characters in the Plays**

Let us focus now more on the construction of the characters in Beckett's plays. Besides suffering from mutual dependence they receive, most of the time, similar meanings such as hobos and tramps. They are macabrely funny and outspoken as the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*. However, contrary to them, they overpass the question of good and evil by showing themselves to be interdependent and worthy of an apocalyptic scenario.

*Happy Days*, which is divided in two acts and was written in 1961, centers on the relationship between a couple in their 50s and 60s. Winnie, the protagonist, is covered in sand up to her waist in the first act whereas in the second act the sand mound covers her up to her neck, leaving only her head visible to the audience. The sand, which can be read as a metaphor of time similar to an hourglass, never completely encompasses her, conferring her still some time to digress about life. Watt, who argues that time is a central element in Beckett's plays and something we can never completely master, argues that it falls short of domineering the loquacious Winnie. As he puts it,

[...] Winnie, trapped in a scorched mound of earth, proves to be indefatigable, as her reveries from the past and reading of the present

bolster the spirits throughout *Happy Days*. This buoyancy, it seems, oddly relates to both her fallible memory and to the mystery that every audience desires to see unraveled: namely, the past. How did Winnie get in this predicament? Why is her confinement made more extreme between the two acts of the play? Beckett withholds this information...“Strange thing”, Winnie says, “time like this, drift up into the mind” (p. 44), confirming both the role of memory in her daily life and our sense that an explanation must exist for her predicament (Watt, 2011, p. 28).

Characters and objects in his work are abundant in symbolism. The names of the two characters in *Happy Days* contain an irony in themselves. Winnie is a woman of about fifty who speaks copiously about life and things in general. She does not look like a winner at all, as her name might suggest, but rather a peculiar loser who nevertheless sounds happy about life and can see the beauty of it. She reflects on an uncertain time which could correspond to the happy days or good times. On the other hand, her husband Willie, a man of about sixty, is very laconic and monosyllabic and contrary to what his name could lead one to believe, has almost no will in life. He is the counterpoint of Winnie and has a minor role in the play. His wife is always giving him orders, which he tends to obey.

Among the various objects that Winnie rummages in her bag, the gun is the one that strikes us more vehemently and it can be read and interpreted in various ways. A human invention (like the mirror, the comb and the lipstick) it is always there as an enigma of death and the power to kill and it may also represent the perils of everyday life modern men and women have to face. The enemy, nowadays, is not necessarily an outsider (an invading army, for example) but can be found within us or correspond to our own conscience betraying us with our existential dilemmas. Therefore, the gun also stands for the power of self-destruction. Nevertheless, it appears in a very light and almost surreal context in the play. It only alludes to those things, thus provoking our amazement.

Given that Winnie speaks abundantly about everyday life and mundane things, this character is formed through the notion that language can confer meaning to ordinary events that are happening all the time in our lives and that can thus acquire importance or simply a different significance. Looking at this peculiar mode of enunciation, it shows that language can be used to add and create new meanings in our existence. Her husband Willie,

on the other hand, centers around the idea that for some people life can be lived in a more simple and down-to-earth way, restricting it to very little use of language. Moreover, Winnie resorts a lot to a linguistic structure peculiar to English: phrasal verbs. Given that the mode of enunciation deals with, among other things, the ordering of words in a sentence by the person who is articulating it in a speech or written text in relation to meaning and who is the receptor, the combination of a verb and a particle brings to the surface the fact that each language has its own peculiarities, and that they may be inexistent in other languages. The phrasal verbs “bring up”, “wear away” and “fly by”, for example, reflect the passage of time and the emergence of consciousness, as well as a certain state of melancholia, and show that, in any language, we can only speak through a specific structure that ends up conditioning our thoughts. Plays on words, that is puns, are also present in his plays such as using the word radish, which written this way refers to a vegetable but is also a homophone of the word reddish, which means something resembling or similar to red. This serves to show that one word can condense more than one meaning and send us to different directions depending on the context that it is inserted.

As regards the two other plays, Atkinson points out that “In *Endgame*, as in *Waiting for Godot*, the central character is a tyrant. Here he is called Hamm.” (The New York Times, 1958, p. 1) The name Hamm, in English, makes a clear allusion to the word “hammer” and can be taken to imply that the main character is always hammering his ideas and whims on the other three characters, whose names all make reference to the word “nail” in different languages: Clov is similar to the French word *clove*, Nagg resonates with the word *Nagel* in German and Nell is similar to nail in English. In fact, that is what really happens considering Clov is Hamm’s adoptive son and slave and Nagg and Nell are his parents, whom he treats badly through rejection and explicit threats. This prompted Adorno to make the following exclamation,

Hamm is the king, about whom everything turns and who can do nothing himself. The incongruity between chess as pastime and the excessive effort involved becomes on the stage an incongruity between athletic pretense and the lightweight actions that are performed. Whether the game ends with stalemate or with perpetual check, or whether Clov wins, remains unclear, as if charity in that would already be too much meaning. Moreover, it is probably not so

important, because everything would come to an end in stalemate as in checkmate (Adorno, 2001, p. 146).

In the play, Hamm and Clov cannot live one without the other. The metaphor of the hammer and the nail alludes to the fact that human beings depend on each other and have yearnings that may never be completely fulfilled. In *Endgame*, as well as in *Waiting for Godot*, these sentiments are projected onto others and even transcend notions of good and evil inasmuch as they bring to light more primitive feelings that precede those concepts. What is a hammer without a nail and vice-versa? As Greenblatt puts it,

Reduced to bare essentials, the maimed, struggling, incomplete characters of *Endgame* – though often behaving as if they were the bumbling protagonists of a farce – raise unsettling questions about meaning and absurdity, power and dependency, time and repetition, language and the void (Greenblatt, 2006, p. 2662).

The relationship of interdependence between Hamm and Clov, who are tormented and haunted by the presence of each other, extends throughout the whole play. This becomes very evident in the following dialogue,

HAMM: Why do you stay with me?

CLOV: Why do you keep me?

HAMM: There's no one else.

CLOV: There's nowhere else (Beckett, 1990, p. 95).

This type of relationship is further elaborated by Watt when he states that,

Consider Hamm's echo of *The Tempest* near the conclusion of *Endgame*: "Our revels are now ended." In Shakespeare's play, Prospero is referring specifically to the pageant of Spirits he produced for Ferdinand and Miranda's spectation. – "These our actors/As I foretold you, were all spirits, and/Are melted into thin air..." (4.148-50). This echo in *Endgame* has motivated some postcolonial critics to adduce parallels between Shakespeare's play and Beckett's: their abusive master-slave relationships, Caliban's similarity to Clov as a colonized subject and so on. Hamm's declaration nonetheless implies a dénouement that never occurs in a play so resistant to closure as *Endgame* (Clov is probably still preparing to leave Hamm). Further, Prospero the magician wields the power to summon airy players; Hamm enjoys no such prerogative, and here remarks only on Nagg's

retreat into his dustbin after unsuccessfully attempting to rouse Nell from hers (Watt, 2011, p. 30).

Similar to the anonymous, isolated and embittered narrator of *Notes from Underground*, by Dostoyevsky, Beckett's characters in his plays also speak from a subterranean position, be it symbolical or real, where more general thoughts, ideas, feelings and concepts are confronted with a current of subconscious stream of consciousness. Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, for example, live in a dustbin and pop up from it every now and then, much to his disgust and affliction. They represent a conflictive relationship between parents and children.

For Adorno, "the misery of participants in the *Endgame* is the misery of philosophy." (Adorno, 2001, p. 130) and everything points at its demise. According to him, being, which is proclaimed by existential philosophy as the meaning of being, becomes the opposite of itself. Thereby, the proactive force of the human being, so worshipped in Western thought, especially the European one, is questioned and put at stake by our own contradictions, forebodings and intuition. Moreover, in common with that narrator, they simply speak their own mind without caring what other people's judgment might be and very easily find themselves in a difficult situation. They are also, for the most part, rather grumpy, especially in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*.

Let us move on now to *Waiting for Godot*. In this play, originally composed in French in the years 1948-49 and later translated into English by Beckett himself, all the characters are interdependent and wait for something that never happens. It is his most famous play and presents us with two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait in vain on a road for the arrival of a man called Godot, who is "a kind of acquaintance" (Beckett, 1990, p. 24). In their hopeless waiting, they meet Pozzo and Lucky. The former, as the name suggests, is a clown or ex-clown, and the latter is his slave, submitted to him by a rope. The fact that Lucky almost never speaks could serve as an irony to his name, since he does not have to express his thoughts or articulate ideas and feelings very often. As regards Godot, the main character of the play who never appears, Worton states that,

Much has been written about who or what Godot is. My own view is that he is simultaneous whatever we think he is and not what we think

he is: he is an *absence*, who can be interpreted at moments as God, death, the lord of the manor, a benefactor, even Pozzo, but Godot has a *function* rather than a *meaning*. He stands for what keeps us chained to and in existence, he is the unknowable that represents hope in an age where there is no hope, he is whatever fiction we want him to be – as long as he justifies our life as waiting (Worton, 2010, p. 70-71).

The play, divided in two acts, has an extra character that is a boy who works for Godot and only enters the scene at the end of the first and second act to exchange a few words with the other characters and announce that Godot won't arrive on that day but will arrive on the next. The theme of hope and waiting is pertinent here. We all wait for something in our lives, and maybe this waiting keeps us busy and confers meaning to our existence. Without goals and projects, our lives would be meaningless. However, Vladimir and Lucky do not have any project in life other than waiting for something that they already subconsciously sense will never happen. This renders them fragile and pitiful and at the same time hopeless and forsaken, evoking the Freudian concept of *Hilflosigkeit*, i.e., helplessness. This state of the soul or feeling of helplessness may eventually affect any person in their lives for different reasons: lack of parental support, economic hardship or fear of death, for example. Nevertheless, in the case of the two tramps it permeates their lives from the beginning until the end of the play.

The famous last lines of Estragon and Vladimir at the end of the second act, coupled with the stage direction, are iconic of ambivalent feelings and the dichotomy between words and action that affects both the characters of the play and real life individuals:

ESTRAGON: Well? Shall we go?  
VLADIMIR: Pull on your trousers.  
ESTRAGON: What?  
VLADIMIR: Pull on your trousers.  
ESTRAGON: You want me to pull off my trousers?  
VLADIMIR: Pull ON your trousers.  
ESTRAGON: [Realizing his trousers are down.] True.  
[He pulls up his trousers.]  
VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?  
ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.  
[They do not move.]  
CURTAIN (Beckett, 1990, p. 88).

Thus, both Estragon and Vladimir are torn between their desire to continue waiting for Godot, whom they know at least subconsciously will never arrive and the resolution expressed through words to leave and end this cycle, which is contradicted by their actions and unfortunately never happens. They end up therefore repeating themselves and are ruled by more unconscious feelings that undermine their conscious yet contentious decision which was rationally taken.

## **Final Considerations**

Writing about the role of Beckett's drama and how it is situated in and reflects on current times, Adorno argues that,

Humankind, whose general species-name fits badly into Beckett's linguistic landscape, is only that which humanity has become. As in utopia, the last days pass judgement on the species. But this lamentation – within mind itself – must reflect that lamenting has become impossible. No amount of weeping melts the armor; only that face remains on which the tears have dried up. That is the basis of a kind of artistic behaviour denounced as inhumane by those whose humanity has already become an advertisement for inhumanity, even if they have as yet no notion of that fact. Among the motives for Beckett's regression to animal-like man, that is probably the deepest. By hiding its countenance, his poetic work participates in the absurd (Adorno, 2001, p. 126).

Beckett's work, inasmuch as it relinquishes traditional philosophical concepts such as Being, Permanence and Truth, reflects the current fragmented reality in which we find ourselves and, at the same time, a peculiar psychological configuration of the mind. It questions and puts in check several philosophical doctrines and inquiries such as ontology, phenomenology and existentialism. The displacement and distancing from a linear character and the rupture of traditional patterns of speech in Beckett's plays sheds light upon a complex psychological and social structure of human beings and the considerably rhapsodic and fragmented form contemporary human beings experience reality.

His art does not work with pre-determined concepts and it abolishes all kinds of philosophical doctrines in an attempt to bring to the fore, through a process of deconstruction, a state of mental dissolution and disintegration

as well as a mutual dependence that all his characters suffer from, and that is also familiar to us as human beings. They even transcend notions of good and evil inasmuch as they are torn between psychological conflicts and deep emotional needs that are projected onto the other. Moreover, most of his characters (the clowns and tramps, for example) live on the fringes of society, which gives them a different perspective on life and at the same time allows them to express it more naturally. Writing about the role of laughter in our lives, Adorno argues that,

Psychoanalysis explains clownish humor as a regression back to a primordial ontogenetic level, and Beckett's regressive play descends to that level. But the laughter it inspires ought to suffocate the laughter. That is what happened to humor, after it became – as an aesthetic medium – obsolete, repulsive, devoid of any canon of what can be laughed at; without any place for reconciliation, where one could laugh; without anything between heaven and earth harmless enough to be laughed at (Adorno, 2001, p. 134).

It is precisely the dilemma between acting and being that is at stake here: what are we supposed to do in a world in which the rules and norms have become questionable and the only means of communication is language in its broadest terms? Is not our essence precisely a lack of a pre-determined essence, which is only given through that which we cannot completely master, such as language, the unconscious or death as a consummated fact? Watching Beckett's plays may mean laughing inside rather than aloud and having a silent understanding that is similar to an insight.

Following the steps of James Joyce, who retreaded the paths of Ulysses, Beckett reinforces the idea that the contemporary human being's odyssey is, after all, a search and an internal movement. Anchoring itself to the legacy of various civilizations, this search reflects on the meaning of life that is not given to us a priori. For Beckett, human finitude delimits our existence. Therefore, they are the same fragments that we could find in the work of Shakespeare, and which are given to us through dreams or memories and remarkable experiences, that reach or haunt us now in the middle of the day, making us think and reflect on our condition as human beings or the moment we are living in. Contrary to the Bard, however, in the work of Beckett God has already left the stage or stepped outside for a long time, and it is up to us to confer meaning to life.

The construction of Beckett's characters in his plays makes them deal with impasses and the maiming of reason by reinventing themselves. Inhabiting bleak and apocalyptic scenarios surrounded by rubble and debris most of the time, they create new forms of subjectivity that question the status quo from within by the use of language, gestures and a peculiar mode of enunciation. In other words, they simply say what others would not dare to for fear of being reprimanded or punished and this is their way of handling and overcoming a lack of willingness and capability and the need to express themselves that assails them, as well as the modern artist.

His plays are an attempt to situate and understand the human being in an ever more fragmented context, where certain traditional ideas are no longer applicable. His work reflects new identities that are being constructed through a shift in perspective and positioning by means of unprecedented forms of expression. As Worton argues,

Beckett's fascination with paradoxes is grounded in his conviction that we can (partially) know only ephemeral moments and that, in a world in which there is no God, we consequently seek for 'logical' explanations – which are themselves fictions and manipulations of reality; even the exact science of mathematics becomes another series of texts to be read with suspicion (Worton, 2010, p. 80).

Beckett's main characters all share a social disadvantage. They are either too old, like the weary old man in *Krapp's Last Tape* who listens to his own voice on a tape narrating events from his life which he does not completely recognize, or a woman, as in *Happy Days* or tramps and clowns in *Waiting for Godot* and the handicapped parents in *Endgame*.

This symbolizes a shift in perspective because they no longer speak from a fixed position, but can assume different points of view and build new identities. This feeling of marginality, of not belonging or not knowing what to belong to, creates characters that are outsiders. It is in this context that Greenblatt states that,

In *Waiting for Godot* the main characters wait for an arrival that is constantly deferred. They inhabit a bleak landscape seemingly confined to one road, one tree; they talk of moving on, yet never leave. Subsequent plays restrict the acting space to a room, to urns, to a mound in which the actor is buried; characters are physically confined or disabled, until *Not I* (1973) presents the most minimal embodiment

of human consciousness available to theatrical representation: a disembodied mouth (Greenblatt, 2006, p. 2661).

The modes of enunciation in Beckett's plays capture this movement humankind has made from a more outward tendency to a more inward one: the reflection on the legacy that history and different philosophical doctrines have left us. Contrary to Homer's epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which outline a movement from the inside to the outside (the onset of The Trojan War, the return of Ulysses home), Beckett's work evinces a movement from the outside to the inside and how we deal with this new reality, which is related to the emergence of the concept of subjectivity. The act language that defined the ancients, *i.e.*, the language that started an action such as a war or an expedition has been slowly transformed into the introspective language that characterizes modern and contemporary individuals. This is a language of reflection and questioning and Beckett makes us contemplate about how much we inhabit this language from within it. His plays show us how implicated and entangled we are by it and the meanings it creates. It is around that opening that our existence transits and we may be able to think nowadays, and this is one aspect among many others that makes Beckett's plays timeless and therefore still so fascinating in our own era.

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