

Beckett and the Poetics of the Absurd

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Beckett's poetry was produced predominantly in the 1930s, with a further substantial return in the 1940s, and occasional poems followed in the mid-1970s. But his poetic experiments never really ceased to contribute to the creative energies moulding his novels and dramas.

Beckett's composing his poetry in both French and English led to 'self-translations', which are not only telling examples of the essential separation of poetry and verse, but they also illustrate that the overall structure in his poetry is mainly determined by an image, sound effect or a tradition resistant counterpoint rather than by implied poetic meaning obeying to established poetic structures, a story-line, or 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith' and to which all else can be rendered subservient.

The above formulated generalization inevitably brings to one's mind Beckett's writings in prose and for the stage. Because, just for the sake of an arch-known example, the 'nothing happens—twice' as Beckett stated speaking about *Waiting for Godot* formulates the lack of importance of narrative in the play, as well as the increased number of possible interpretations. The minimal utterances between stops and silences, Lucky's speeded-up verbalizations draw our attention as much to the rhythm as to the meaning of the play, creating a characteristic lack of coincidence between action and word. There is a similar lack of coincidence between Beckett's poetry and his poems close to the lack of coincidence between dramatic form and play in his works written for the stage.

Since Beckett wrote many of his poems in French, his self-translations can be used as eloquent examples of creative 'making of one's own' and stress the multilingual, multicultural nature so relevant in his works and his philosophy. Most of his poems were written earlier than his other works, which means that they illustrate his apprenticeship, the starting points of a process, and reveal some of his initial attitudes that might have contributed to his later ventures.

His early poem the "Whoroscope" (CP, 1-6)¹ displays Beckett's conscientious handling of the ironies of his text. The pun of the title and

¹ Beckett, Samuel. 1996. *Versek angol, magyar, francia nyelven. (Poems in English,*

wordplay elsewhere (such as the Joycean “prostisciutto” in line 13) clearly create a mask, irritate and prompt interest in the depths they half-conceal. The lines, “Kip of Christ hatch it!” (line 49), “Jesuitasters copy” (line 51), “In the name of Bacon will you chicken me up that egg” (line 66), “Anna Maria! / She reads Moses and says her love is crucified” (lines 69–70), “Christina the ripper” (line 92) are irritating in themselves and paradoxically reveal what they are meant to conceal: a unique treatise on lust, sex, intellect, and the world that ‘stinks fresh’.

The irony applied to Galileo’s revolutionary theory concerning the movement of the earth is meant to conceal the movement of the body during the sexual act pointless, senseless when thought of in terms of its potential to create new life. The movement illustrative of this near nonsensical desire is rendered absurd through a grammatical trick that will be repeated, when Beckett defines *Waiting for Godot* as a play in which nothing happens twice: “That’s not moving, that’s *moving*”. However, since we are reading Beckett the otherwise present reference to Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of the blood could enrich the list of possible interpretations. The line could also refer to the heart of King Henry IV: the dead heart that is moved, taken to a Jesuit college, a fact that moves the Jesuits.

The poem abounds in references to literature and mythology pretending to aim at concealing the dominating pornography. As we have already mentioned it might be interpreted simply as ‘acting as if.’ Christ, Maria Magdalena, Cain and Abel, Moses, Copernicus, Galileo, Joyce, Yeats, Zeus and Leda, Prometheus, the seven days of creation are invoked to add to the power of the experiment and they lose their own meaning being recycled in a pornographic context. The recycled material does not add to the meaning of the sexual act shamelessly revealed,—on the contrary,—its function could be defined as a deliberate attempt to divert attention from the possible enrichment of the interpretation. They introduce the sense of chaos into the ‘narrative’, by means of juxtaposition. The incantation of the last lines touches the limits of blasphemy, but it cannot be interpreted as such without violating the atmosphere of the poem:

Then I will rise and move moving
toward Rahab of the snows,
the murdering matinal pope-confessed amazon,
Christina the ripper.

Oh Weulles spare the blood of a Frank
 who has climbed the bitter steps,
 (René du Peron...!)
 and grant me my second
 starless inscrutable hour.
 (*Whoroscope*, lines 89–97. *Versek*, 12)

Beckett's first poems are characterized by contradictory intensities formulating a passion for making words his own and the dilemmas of coming to terms with the previous existence of those words and their sociability as exchange, to protect and project the self by adopting a personae. There seems to be a sense of obligation that brings these multidirectional forces into focus, an obligation to self, to art, to society, nurtured by Protestantism and fostered by Geulincx, among others, in a sensitive mind certain of its powers but far from certain of their best orientation.²

"Gnome" (*CP*, 7) describes the inescapable circularity central to Beckett's later aesthetics. The cliché formulating the years of learning penetrates another cliché, that of adult society. The clichés anchor the opening in traditional social attitudes, but "squandering" of "Spend the years of learning squandering" becomes the expression of "courage." The "years of wondering" define courage evoking the tradition of Goethe's *Young Werther*. Thus the interplay of positive and negative value judgments is perpetuated and leads back to the earlier challenged cliché: society condemns the youth's antisocial preoccupations "politely turning / From the loutishness of learning". But "loutish" was the term used by the Church when condemning Galileo's learning. And Galileo's knowledge of the universe managed to triumph over conventionalism:

Spend the years of learning squandering
 Courage for the years of wandering
 Through a word politely turning
 From the loutishness of learning.
 (*Gnome. Versek*, 16)

Similar revitalization of clichés characterizes Beckett's 1935 collection of poems *Echo's Bones*.

On the walk of a few miles from south to west of Dublin, from Portobello along the canal and the river Liffey in "*Enueg I*" (*CP*, 10–12) we meet an enigmatic child for whom 'want' and 'do' are as irreconcilable as for Beckett

² See Little, Roger. 1994. "Beckett's poems and verse translations or: Beckett and the limits of Poetry." in Pilling, John ed. *Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 184–196.

'can't' and 'must' are. The mental process is surprised as "the mind annulled / wrecked in the wind." The reason is that Beckett wants to introduce the meeting with the child:

I stopped and climbed the bank to see the game.
 A child fidgeting at the gate called up:
 "Would we be let in Mister?"
 "Certainly" I said "you would."
 But, afraid, he set off down the road.
 "Well" I called after him "why wouldn't you go in?"
 "oh" he said, knowingly,
 "I was in that field before and I got put out."
 So on
 derelict, [. . .] (*Versek*, 22)

The final poetic gesture of "*Enueg I*" is directed both towards the sea that lies downstream and encompasses the whole world and towards non-being, which to the suffering protagonist seems a desirable ideal:

Blotches of doomed yellow in the pit of the Liffey;
 the fingers of the ladders hooked over the parapet,
 soliciting;
 a slush of vigilant gulls in the gay spew of the sewer.
 Ah the banner
 the banner of meat bleeding
 on the silk of the seas and the arctic flowers
 that do not exist. (*Versek*, 24)

The journeys around Dublin, in the west of Ireland, London and Paris are explorations in a poetic manner marked by juxtapositions which interrupt and subvert any narrative progress. He does not use italics to separate the English, German, Englished Greek and Latin words, since the text thus composed can both withhold and explain the sexuality governing the poems. In "*Serena I*" in "her dazzling oven storm of peristalsis / limae labor", the goat in "*Enueg I*" is "remotely pucking the gate of his field" and so on. The meaning does not vanish through this method, but the pretended desire to hide sexuality tells of self-censorship, which in turn means the acknowledgment of social codes. Puritanism and lustiness seem to be exclusive and the material treated thus dictates the ambivalence of expression.

Cultural references and more or less veiled quotations are also source of ambivalence. Beckett juxtaposes their individual significances creating new meanings. A good example is when in the introductory lyric passage of "*Sanies I*" cycles through the north Dublin countryside:

all the livelong way this day of sweet showers from Porttrane on the
seashore

Donabate sad swans of Turvey Swords
ponding along in three ratios like a sonata
like a Ritter with pommelled scrotum atra cura on the step
Botticelli from the fork down [...] (CP, 17. *Versek*, 34)

The sonata form, the German knight, and Latin introduce the Shakespearean connotation through the "poor forked animal" taken from *King Lear*, to confer it the qualities envisaged by the Italian painter. The solutions adopted here take us closer to Beckett's essential manner.

The poems written in French between 1937 and 1939 mark a change towards a less pompous mask. The intellectual challenge represented by the mastery of a foreign language seems to a large extent to have replaced in Beckett the urge to prove his deep sense of the world's intellectual patrimony. Extensive learning is present in these poems as well, but it is more lightly worn, and is largely restricted to general knowledge: the Greek myths, as in "jusque dans la caverne ciel et sol" (CP, 53), or Kant and the Lisbon earthquake in "ainsi a-t-on beau" (CP, 48). When Gabriel de Mortillet is evoked, he is, appropriately, no more than a stone statue in the "Arènes de Lutèce" (CP, 52). Knowledge petrifies—it is the hardest lesson to learn.

In "musique de l'indéférence" (CP, 46) the general replaces the particular. The opening series of nouns through their apposition produce the uncertainty of their relationship, and because there is no punctuation this apposition and uncertainty persist in the poem. The core statement "du silence [...] / couvre leurs voix" is a paradox coordinated with the second one, which ends the poem: "que / je n'entende plus / me taire". The paradoxes remain unresolved, but tellingly explore identity and relationships through notions of sound and silence. The voices are heard again in "que ferais-je sans ce monde sans visage sans questions" (CP, 60) where a "gouffre de murmures" is linked, again in apposition, with both silence and self, and it is again the lack of punctuation that allows for both interpretations. The narrator expresses his isolation as more fully shared by years of meditation as he ends "sans voix parmi les voix / enfermées avec moi", expressing the impossibility of adequate expression.

The title of the 1947–9 poems is "*Mort de A. D.*" (CP, 56) represents the universality of death, another basic theme that preoccupies Beckett. His statement that man prepares for death from the cradle or before is directed, in the novels and plays, into more sustained metaphors of the eternal triangle of Eros, Thanatos and Logos. The image of the solitary figure in the bare room desperately trying to reconcile himself to himself, to the Other, to

life, to death, is tested in the poems, and the ambivalent projections of the mask in the plays become the ambivalent projections of the masque. The poetically tested juxtapositions help him adjust to self and society through words which belong to the community but gain dramatic strength through the individual mark attached to them.

The multiplicity of interactive obligations creates pressures on a vision which must enact that knot of contradictions. Beckett's poetic vision states that the challenge and the joy of coming to terms with this world have no limits. He repeatedly and forcibly refers to *The Bible*, especially to The New Testament, because it is a text that he knows he cannot trust. Thus, in spite of his life-long obsession with *The Bible*, he manages to prevent its becoming the symbol of universal truth. The characters of his fictional and dramatic works seem to live nearly exclusively through the text they produce, but the proto-texts they employ excel through their denial of their initial meaning, or any meaning at all.

The knot of contradictions central to *Waiting for Godot* unfolds through the juxtaposition of a clearly biblical theme and the denial to artistically and ethically interpret it. When to the question "Do you remember the Bible?" Estragon answers, "I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Colored they were. Very pretty", Beckett launches one of the many excellent deviations from universally accepted symbols: Estragon becomes a solitary figure in the 'Christian' world, unable, and perhaps unwilling to understand himself. He is not going to reconcile himself to God or himself, for he is suspended in an ambivalent projection of his (and our) memory. *The Bible* is then just one of the characters' texts and it loses authority over its own interpretation. It becomes just one of the expressions of the 'nothing' that happens twice in the play. The juxtapositions tested in his poems help him deprive the symbols belonging to the community of their meaning, and gain dramatic strength through the individual mark attached to them.

The use of the 'knot' representative of Beckett's poetic strategy in drama is brilliantly revealed through the tree in *Waiting for Godot*. The leafless tree is a concrete object on the stage, but in Act II four or five leaves appear on it. The context of first reference to the possible symbolic meanings of the tree strikes by means of contrast. The argument is centred round the importance and difficulties of taking off one's shoes:

Estragon: It hurts?

Vladimir: Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

Estragon: (*pointing*). You might button it all the same.

Vladimir: (*stopping*). True. (*He buttons his fly*). Never neglect the little things of life.

Estragon: What do you expect, you always wait till the last moment.

Vladimir: (*musingly*). The last moment... (*He meditates.*) Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?

Estragon: Why don't you help me?³

The reference to *Proverbs*, 13:12—namely, “Hopes deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is, it is a tree of life”—is created through the archaic discourse, placed in Vladimir's amnesiac discourse. The ‘mask’ employed at this point is intriguing. Vladimir is trying to remember something that might have a meaning, and might teach him whether taking off one's shoes makes sense or it does not, and whether waiting, hoping for help, perhaps helping makes any sense at all. Estragon's belated “Nothing” is a kind of an answer to the given situation and the underlying dilemma, or following the logic of the situation to neither of the two dilemmas.

Vladimir's omission of ‘heart’ and ‘tree’ calls our attention to their respective un-revealed, ‘avoided’ symbolic meanings in relation to life (*viz.* heart-life and emotion, tree-symbol of life and desire). Critics speak of Godot's trees rather than tree, because the tree is referred to as a gallows-tree and an object of exaltation, but not to be trusted:

Vladimir: It's for the kidneys. (Silence. Estragon looks attentively at the tree.) What do we do now?

Estragon: Wait.

Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting.

Estragon: What about hanging ourselves.

Vladimir: Hmm. It'd give us an erection!

Estragon: (highly excited). An erection!

Vladimir: With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you not know that?

Estragon: Let's hang ourselves immediately!

Vladimir: From a bough? (They go towards the tree.) I wouldn't trust it. (*WG*, 17)

Later Estragon refers to the gallows-tree as object of desire saying “Pity we haven't got a bit of rope” (53); then the gallows-tree seems to be unattainable:

Estragon: (looking at the tree). What is it?

Vladimir: It's a tree.

Estragon: Yes, but what kind?

Vladimir: I don't know. A willow. (Estragon draws Vladimir towards the tree. They stand motionless before it. Silence.)

Estragon: Why don't we hang ourselves?

Vladimir: With what?

Estragon: You haven't got a bit of rope?

Vladimir: No.

Estragon: Then we can't. (*WG*, 18)

Although the same tree becomes the symbol of change and stability:

Vladimir: We are happy.

Estragon: We are happy. (Silence) What do we do now, now that we are happy?

Vladimir: Wait for Godot. (Estragon groans. Silence.) Things have changed here since yesterday.

Estragon: Everything oozes.

Vladimir: Look at the tree.

Estragon: It's never the same pus from one second to the next.

Vladimir: The tree, look at the tree. (Estragon looks at the tree.)

Estragon: Was it not here yesterday?

Vladimir: Yes, of course it was there. Do you not remember? We nearly hanged ourselves from it. But you wouldn't. Do you not remember?

Estragon: You dreamt it. (*WG*, 60)

Crucifixion, Resurrection, the tree of knowledge—there are some other possible references. It is the many possible symbolic meanings that can be attached to the tree that define it as a sub-category of that nothing that happens twice. The repetition of the symbol, which is never the same is refused its symbolic interpretations. The juxtaposition of senses suggests the multiplicity of the possible meanings. The meanings formulated by the text support the idea of the need to talk in a dramatic pretext where action fails to be effective or relevant. The denotative and symbolic functions of the language fail to function as meaningful means of communication, but do they kill the dead voices and the dead poetry so often discussed by critics:

Vladimir: We have our reasons.

Estragon: And the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make noises like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

(Silence.)

Vladimir: They all speak together.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

(Silence.)

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They rustle.

Vladimir: What do they say?
 Estragon: They talk about their lives.
 Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.
 Estragon: They have to talk about it.
 Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.
 Estragon: It is not sufficient.
 (Silence.)
 Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.
 Estragon: Like leaves.
 Vladimir: Like ashes.
 Estragon: Like leaves.
 (Long silence.) (*WG*, 63)

One can hear Dante's souls in Purgatory in Beckett's dead voices, but as it has already been noticed by critics the differences are more relevant than the similarities. Dante's dead voices can hope for resurrection after Calliope has been invoked, while the sequence "Like leaves." "Like ashes." "Like leaves" responding to "Like leaves." "Like ashes." "Like leaves." clearly replaces the idea of time's passage contained in 'sand' when it is answered by "ashes", which in *Endgame* comes to signify the end of the world (32).

The above passage from *Waiting for Godot* is illustrative of the more general model on which the play is based: the repetition of two nearly identical poetic passages following the announcement of the subject of meditation. It is not a monologue, that could stress the meditative value of the section, but it takes the more dynamic shape of a dialogue. This way the elements of figurative language are denied poetic coherence, the similes are restricted to Vladimir and Estragon's utterance and fall back onto themselves while the centripetal force of the intertextual meanings undercuts the possibility of any intelligible communication within the dramatic work. Parallel to this the dialogue maintains its course, it progresses. Its construction illustrates the multiple repetitions that support the larger scale juxtaposition of Vladimir-Estragon, Lucky-Pozzo, Boy-Godot 'scenes' of the two acts.

If we accept as a starting point the idea that Beckett's condensed, often paradoxical structures, models, 'lyrical recyclings', and linguistic twists of philosophical 'knots' are expressed through condensed poetic diction we have to agree with those who are tempted to read Joyce and Woolf as writing fiction enormously supported by the generative power of poetic diction. Beckett's approach is, however, of a different nature from that of Joyce or Woolf. Beckett's idea is that the aesthetic appreciation flourishes best when rational needs subside. This attitude in turn leads to the negation of Logos at the surface level, a 'recycled mask' hiding Eros in order to formulate the

credentials of the absurd, the poetics of which, is in need of logical sequences thanatizing the thanatos.

Occasionally, the double negation will have its effects in Beckett's works placed onto the linguistic sphere, that is, textuality is the cause and effect that is conferred authority. Rabinovitz, when analyzing the addenda to *Watt*⁴ points out the fact that the poems included in the addenda offer possible interpretations for the crucial elements of *Watt*. The governing method of the three poems included in the addenda is certainly juxtaposition. Note how the names Watt and Knott are juxtaposed with the words "what" and "not" in the following poem:

Watt will not
abate one jot
but of what

of the coming to
of the being at
of the going from
Knott's habitat (249)

The suggestion underlying these possible redefinitions is characteristic of Beckett: identity is subject to interpretations, but interpretations are impossible because nothing can be trusted in his fictional world. Remember the possible, but uncertain definitions that are hinted at in the naming of Godot. The first part of *Godot*, tempts us to interpret the object of desire and waiting in the Almighty, an interpretation Beckett categorically refused. Similarly the interpretation of the English names Estragon and Vladimir, in the French phonetic context could lead to the definition of the two characters as representative of 'speech' and 'being' respectively. This transcultural, inter and intralinguistic attempt violates everyday logic, so, it cannot lead to reliable interpretation. Beckett fully employs the phonetic resources available to formulate later non-acknowledged implications of his text and this takes the text on a plane poetically higher than he is ready to admit.

The gesture brings down the world to the state of desiring nothing else but non-being, and the text is consistent only in formulating the negation of hope and verisimilitude. Beckett's prose is alternatively evasive and concise and suggestive as a line of poetry, and Beckett at times deliberately encourages readers to jump to misleading conclusions to suggest their subsequent discoveries about the deceptive nature of face values. For

⁴ See Rabinovitz, Rubin. 1984. *The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

example, when he is knocked down at the railway station Watt ignores the stimuli of the outer world by means of poetry (Hölderlin, Farquhar). Thus he makes a transition from rational thought to aesthetic contemplation. Intellectual life is shown as debilitating in Watt as in *Echo's Bones*, "Gnome", Arsene's comment based on *Everyman*.⁵

Although Beckett's early fiction is based on frequent allusions and conventional settings and displays an interest in outer reality, an outer reality that contradicts his characters' desire to withdraw into themselves. In his novels completed after *Murphy* the chronology becomes indistinct. When Watt wants to find out what the time is he gets no answer. The best example is perhaps the definition that is given to interest taken in time when we get to know that it was earlier than he hoped. Sam admits at the beginning of part four that the things in part four happened before the events presented in part three. Watt's inverted speech is another example of how Beckett employs clearly poetic strategies to express the chaotic character of time. Rabinovitz states in his conclusions to the analysis of Beckett's fiction in its development that the relationship between the conceptual and the existential seems to have a more or less identifiable regulative status.

Beckett, [. . .], loathes 'the complacent scientific conceptualism that made contact with outer reality the index of mental well-being.' As the narrator of *Murphy* observes, the 'nature of outer reality remained obscure. . . The definition of outer reality, or of reality short and simple, varied according to the sensibility of the definer.' (Rabinovitz, 182)

Rabinovitz argues that Beckett's works should not be understood as unrealistic or absurd because they are concerned simply with the outer world as an illusion and as his perspective of the outer world deteriorates, one gains a clearer view of inner reality, and it is the inner reality that shapes and colours one's perception of the outer world. Rabinovitz's implied suggestion is that the prose thus obscured through word order, chaotic chronology, and interpolations of silences and voices approaches poetic diction and the generic title it should have is *Comment c'est. How It Is* is devoted to two subjects, how it is and how it began both contained in the title itself of one of Beckett's most exciting books: comment c'est and commencer sound very much alike.

The tradition to which it alludes as Abbott⁶ states it is the epic which is circular, an expression of endless torment, and fragmentary. In *The Bible* and

⁵ Knowledge: "Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide, / In thy most need to go by thy side." (*Everyman*, II. 522-23).

⁶ See Abbott, Porter, H. 1994. "'Texts for Nothing' and 'How It Is.'" in Pilling, John ed. *Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 106-124.

in epics following the biblical tradition (*Paradise Lost*, *The Divine Comedy*) the ordering of things is shown as being just. In *How It Is* is distilled to a final Newtonian essence as the perfection of order. The final object of "our justice" is to show that we are regulated on the basis of symmetry. The presence of evil is resolved in the symmetry of 'an eye for an eye' suggesting that every victim is a victimizer. The idea of symmetry leads to the drama of mathematics as the author is trying to work out the arithmetical terms for the order he postulated. But the author realizes that "something is wrong there" and the creator packs up and abandons the epic.

The failure of his authorship brings about the failure of the poet's authority. It is in the very tradition of the epic that the epic poet is chosen. Beckett's formula is to draw our attention to the constructedness of the epic instead of focusing on the creator of the epic who should be the prophet, the person formulating the absolute truth of which he has been chosen vehicle. Beckett's epic does not end in a song of triumph of the unity of a universe dominated by God who animates Man. Justice and authority are abolished by the very narrative of *How It Is*. Beckett's *How It Is* is of course a travesty of the epic. The function of his narrative is not to enlighten but to stupefy.

The fact that we are constantly reminded of the structure rather than the idea we are searching for, and the bravado of the voice packing to abandon his creation defines another implication clearly contained. The order to which the voice aspired, is also the exclusive, oppressive tyrant's structure but tyranny is rejected as well. One has to look for poetic visions that transcend the text as they illuminate the 'life above in the light' and act against the voice governing the epic: "I see a crocus in a pot in an area in a basement a saffron the sun creeps up the wall a hand keeps in the sun this yellow flower with a string" (*HII*, 22).

The vision could be appropriated with Eliot's vision of the pool filled up with sunshine, but while for Eliot the governing force, the cause of all causes is love of God, Beckett seems to refuse the idea of any kind of authority. When in part two the hand craves its words in the back of its victim surrender to command and design of a superior power is forcibly rejected. That the epic does not eliminate everything is demonstrated by the mud, the voice, the rush of words, the non-defined being: "[...] only me in any case yes alone yes in the mud [...] with my voice yes my murmur" (*HII*, 159). The epic winds up where it began, because we hear the words of departure "how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it" (*HII*, 7). Or these are echoes of the last words of the *Texts for Nothing*: "[...] as soon now, when all will be ended, all said, it says, it murmurs" (*CSP*, 115).

As H. Potter Abbott in his already mentioned essay states, the

continual originating power of the language, the volatility of its conceptual interchange are the sources of 'action' in *How It Is*. The verbal puns starting with the pun of beginnings (the word of God), the cosmic project proclaimed "all balls" (with the implications of male organs of regeneration and the spheres of the universe) are all embedded in the "warmth of primeval mud" (*HII*, 12). The unsettled image of "mud in the mouth or the crawler's tongue" "lolling" in the mud, recycles both the mud out of which God made Adam, and the Word by which God gave life to the mud. And language remains in command when Beckett's word producer gives life to Pim: "who but for me would never Pim we're talking of Pim never be but for me anything but a dumb limp hump flat for ever in the mud but I'll quicken him you wait and see" (*HII*, 58). And the word-creator gives life even to himself claiming "I hear me again murmur me in the mud and am again" (*HII*, 138). Language disposes of originating power, and can deprive or at least make volatile identity: "Pim to Bom to Bem, Pam to Prim, Kram to Krim, Skom to Skum".

Following the tradition of normalization of criticism assessing *How It Is*, Abbott 'recycles' the design of the text of a strophe, providing it with the adequate punctuation and suggests the following reading of it:

And later, much later
 (these aeons, my God!),
 when it [the painting] stops again,
 [with] ten more, [or] fifteen more [words] in me,
 a murmur,
 scarce a breath;
 then,
 from mouth to mud [they go],
 [a] brief kiss,
 [a] brush of lips,
 [a] faint kiss. (Abbott, 120)

Abbott points out that, read like this, the strophe can be understood as one variation on the interchange of mud and word out of which the texts arises. Normalizations are imposed by the very nature of the text. They are the dictates of the tyranny of the Beckett text. Beckett's play with sound and sense is turned into the form of the word under the leading principle "first the sound then the sense" (*HII*, 104).

The interplay of meaning and sound lies in the answer to all the other questions. Beckett concentrates on the wonders of origination. The rhetorical strategies are multiplied, the counter-tropes of reduction, negation, cancellation and despair are all sources of productivity. Beckett's art is not

the art of ending as much as the art of recommencement, much in the fashion of Eliot's "in my end is my beginning."

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