

The Voice in Beckett's 'Dramaticules'

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Abstract:

This work looks at the strange voice that reaches the character in the second part of the dramatic work by the Irish writer Samuel Beckett, commonly known as the 'dramaticules'. In a metaphysical approach, we seek to elucidate the relationship between the voice and the character listening to it, in order to better grasp its significance. In the light of our analysis, we conclude that the voice in question is the crystallisation of the inner voice of the character listening to it. It is the voice of his conscience; the voice that reminds him of his past, his experiences, his existence, which he wants to get rid of in order to reach the peaceful stage of non-being, but in vain. If in the first part of Beckett's drama, the character is confronted with the nothingness of the universe, in the second part he comes face to face with himself. This face-to-face encounter with oneself, a kind of transition from life to death, seems to be more painful than the confrontation with the incomprehensible universe. Indeed, the absolute solitude into which the character is plunged in Beckett's last plays, and his inability to escape the persecutory voice, sufficiently express the powerlessness of man in the face of the suffering of being that Beckett's drama tirelessly seeks to highlight.

Keywords: Beckett, voice, splitting, helplessness, suffering

Résumé :

Ce travail s'interroge sur la voix étrange qui parvient au personnage dans la deuxième partie de l'œuvre dramatique de l'écrivain irlandais Samuel Beckett et communément connue sous le nom de « dramaticules ». Dans une démarche métaphysique, nous cherchons à élucider le rapport entre la voix et le personnage qui l'écoute pour mieux en saisir la portée. À la lumière de l'analyse, nous arrivons à la conclusion que la voix en question est la cristallisation de la voix intérieure du personnage qui l'écoute. Elle est la voix de sa conscience ; la voix qui lui rappelle son passé, son vécu, son existence dont il souhaite se débarrasser pour atteindre le stade paisible de non-être, mais en vain. Si dans la première partie du théâtre de Beckett le personnage est confronté au néant de l'univers, dans la deuxième partie, il fait face à lui-même. Ce face-à-face avec soi, qui est une sorte de transition de la vie à la mort, semble être plus douloureux que la confrontation avec l'univers incompréhensible. En effet, l'absolue solitude dans laquelle est plongé le personnage dans les dernières pièces de Beckett et son incapacité à se soustraire de la voie persécutoire traduisent suffisamment l'impuissance de l'homme face à la souffrance d'être que le théâtre de Beckett cherche inlassablement à mettre en évidence.

Mots-clés : Beckett, voix, dédoublement, impuissance, souffrance

Date of Submission: 15-09-2024

Date of Acceptance: 30-09-2024

I. Introduction

The Irish playwright, novelist, poet, director, and literary critic, Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) is particularly radical in expressing the meaninglessness of existence following the collapse of Western certainties in the aftermath of the Second World War. His dramatic work, for which he is best known, seems to be the epitome of an art of crisis. The author of *Waiting for Godot*, a masterpiece of the 'theatre of the absurd', is concerned to make his plays correspond to the nothingness of existence. This desire to bring his dramatic writing as close as possible to nothingness justifies the minimalist nature of his writing which tends infinitely towards silence and definitive immobility.

This condensed form of theatre is particularly evident in the second part of his dramatic work, made up of increasingly short plays that Beckett himself ironically has called 'dramaticules'. Thomson (65) confirms that position as he specifies that "the plays of the early 1970s – *Not I*, *That Time* and *Footfalls* – are sometimes thought of as the theatrical endpoint of this process". Beckett's minimalist art 'does not aim to achieve generalities, but to produce a concrete experience through the verbal and aural material used' (Hunkeler)¹. The

voice is precisely the main verbal and aural material that Beckett uses in his 'dramaticules' to produce such an experience. Indeed, in his latest plays, a voice of uncertain origin reaches the characters on stage. The main aim of this paper is to interpret the experience Beckett is trying to convey through this strange voice. Following the metaphysical and absurdist logic that underpins Beckett's writing, we hypothesise that this voice, which compels the character to listen, expresses a more concrete level of the staging of human condemnation and suffering that has begun since *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's first play.

1. Facing one's self

It is a well-known fact that Beckett's writing, particularly his dramatic work, tends towards immobility and impossible silence. Beckett's dramatic characters, from *Waiting for Godot* onwards, wander and talk constantly because they cannot do otherwise. Their pain is to have found themselves, without any reason, in a universe devoid of all meaning. They imagine their deliverance only in a state of total non-being. It is this end of the consciousness of being that Hamm in *Endgame* desperately tries to represent mentally. Decreeing the end of their daily pranks by asking Clov to go away from him, he curls up on himself, covers his face with a handkerchief and remains motionless on his wheelchair, after announcing the end of time and all life: "And now ? [Pause.] Moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended" (52). Is it really possible to decree or, rather, to imagine one's own death? We are tempted to answer in the negative. Yet that is exactly what Hamm does. While remaining visibly alive, Hamm imagines himself to be in the world of non-beings. He is not playing the dying man. He is experiencing death in his own way.

The experience of death is thus that of coming face to face with oneself, with one's own inner being, and therefore that of the most absolute solitude. For the dying person, nothing exists any more. Nothing ties him to the physical world. Is this not also a way of finding refuge within oneself, if we know that the Beckettian character does not have the strength to endure the face-to-face confrontation with the world around him?

This refuge is heralded by two major events. The first is the character's partial or total immobility in space. This inertia correlates with a reduction in the space in which he can evolve. From the vast space in which Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, roam, we have moved on to restricted spaces generally represented by small rooms in which almost inert bodies are confined in isolation. The other major fact is that these characters, or rather these faces, are totally or almost silent. Like Hamm, they seem to have signed the end of their lives by standing still and remaining permanently silent. Yet, something quite clearly proves that such a death is not only an illusion but an experience of another form of suffering.

2. The voice of the inner self

Although Beckett's characters, who are known to be very loquacious, have definitely fallen silent or still utter very rare words, silence does not reign supreme in the spaces where they are cloistered. In fact, they are joined by voices that break the silence and invade even their last refuge. The exact source of these voices, to which the character, sometimes reduced to a simple face, listens, remains a mystery.

In *Eh Joe*, for example, we see Joe in his bedroom, sitting on his bed. To make sure he is alone, he checks the window, the door and the wardrobe, making sure there is nothing behind them. He then checks under the bed before sitting down again, surely convinced that he is alone. Just then he hears a low, distinct voice from a distance that calls out to him directly. It was a woman's voice.

The situation in *Footfalls* is more or less the same as in *Eh Joe*. In this play, the heroine, May, is alone in her play area. She is walking back and forth, when a voice from the back of the stage in the dark calls out to her. It's her mother's.

Whether these voices are considered to be those of mothers talking to their children or those of strangers, they seem to hold such a strong power over the people listening to them that we can deduce that they are the voices of their own conscience, "representing the intersection of the inner and outer self" (West, 11). The fact that there are no other people around from whom they could be coming lends weight to this consideration.

The voice that May listens to is therefore nothing other than her own voice, that of her conscience, just as the voice that reaches Joe in *Eh Joe* is that of Joe himself. Esslin (84) thinks no different when he says: "In *Eh Joe* the voice Joe hears has the timbre of a woman's voice, yet that voice too, in another sense, being inside his

¹ « ne vise pas à atteindre des généralités, mais à produire une expérience concrète au moyen de la matière verbale et sonore utilisée »

head, is his own, is the droning on of his own consciousness, of his own compulsion to tell himself his own story". This vision coincides with that of Hubert (43):

This voice-over, which Beckett uses repeatedly in the second part of his dramatic work, is an avatar of a character which does not have the same degree of reality as a character. A simple auditory presence, it is never materialized in a body. It is the metonymic projection of an inner voice which takes on a hallucinatory form. Often tyrannical, it imposes itself on the character, forcing him to exhume the ashes of the past². (My translation)

While in *Eh Joe* and *Footfalls* the voices Joe and May hear seem more or less alien to them, because they are apparently outside them, in *That Time* it is made clear that the voice calling out to the character is his own. It addresses its listener, called the Sovereign, a simple face three metres above the stage, in snatches coming from three different directions.

In *Rockaby* a woman sitting on a lullaby listens to her own recorded voice. Unlike *That Time*, however, the voice the woman is listening to is addressed to her in the third singular person, as if it were talking about another woman. And yet, not only is it her own voice, but it also describes exactly the movements the heroine has undertaken since she decided to withdraw from the world, right up to the moment she sits down in her chair. However, this voice has acquired a certain autonomy by becoming an auditory presence as opposed to the character's physical presence. This is tantamount to saying that the character himself is divided. He is separated from his psychic interior. On the one hand we have the body, sometimes reduced to a simple face, and on the other the spirit embodied by the voice that has emerged from nothing.

This ontological cut seems to be a parody of the Cartesian cogito. Descartes' "I am a thinking substance" is highlighted here through the voice of consciousness, which has freed itself from the body to assume an autonomous physical existence. The split of being in this present case does not, nevertheless, indicate any conflict between the small world of the mind and the large world represented by the external universe, as we have observed with the waiting couple in *Waiting for Godot*. This goes without saying, if we know that the Beckettian character, at this level, has definitively turned his back on the external universe to focus on his internal universe.

If this consciousness has now freed itself from man, taking on an autonomous existence through the audible voice that embodies it, it is because the Beckettian being, in his continual descent into hell, has reached a point where his life becomes pathological. After the body has disintegrated, it is the conscience's turn to crumble before spiralling out of control, plunging the character into a schizophrenic, hallucinatory state. As Hubert (43) reveals, Beckett was very interested in a lecture by Jung on association tests and their importance in dream analysis, and particularly on the Jungian explanation of hallucination, which he defines as follows:

Given that the complexes have a certain will, a sort of ego, we find that in the schizophrenic state, they emancipate themselves from conscious control, to the point of becoming visible and audible. They appear in the form of visions, they express themselves in voices that resemble those of specific people³. (my translation)

Everything points to the fact that the voices we hear are the embodiment of the complexes that Jung evokes and that have been released from conscious control in the characters subject to hallucinations. Although separate and each embodying a degree of autonomy from the other, body and mind are in communion. The mind or consciousness is the sender of auditory messages, while the body or head is the receiver. In other words, it is the physical man who listens to the spirit man. The voice can thus be seen as the alter ego of the face that listens to it. Beckettian man has thus split in two. He exists twice. On the one hand, he exists as a body, but deprived of any real psychological support; on the other, he exists as an autonomous consciousness, speaking and therefore personified, but without any physical or material support.

This phenomenon of splitting into two strangely echoes Hegel's view that because man is spirit, he exists doubly. For this thinker, man first exists in the same way as the things of nature. He then exists for himself, as a spirit capable of questioning and contemplating himself. Under Beckett's biting pen, this dual existence is parodied by stressing the clear distinction between the physical man and the spirit man, a distinction that could certainly not be materialised according to Hegel's thinking. Man's dual existence is therefore only materialised in Beckett's dramatic universe in a bid to reveal the tragedy of being.

In *Ohio Impromptu*, this phenomenon of doubling is much more perceptible. Two individuals, identical

² Cette voix off, que Beckett utilise à maintes reprises dans la deuxième partie de son oeuvre dramatique, est un avatar de personnage qui n'a pas même degré de réalité qu'un personnage. Simple présence auditive, elle n'est jamais matérialisée dans un corps. Elle est la projection métonymique d'une voix intérieure qui revêt une forme hallucinatoire. Souvent tyrannique, elle s'impose au personnage, le forçant à exhumer les cendres du passé

³ Etant donné que les complexes ont une certaine volonté, une manière d'ego, nous constatons que dans l'état schizophrénique, ils s'émancipent du contrôle conscient, au point de devenir visibles et audibles. Ils apparaissent sous forme de visions, ils s'expriment par des voix qui ressemblent à celles des personnes précises.

in every way, are seated at the same table. One, the reader, is reading a story, while the other, the listener, is giving him his undivided attention. Given their terrible resemblance and the strong probability that the story told in the book the reader is reading is his own story, as well as that of the perceiver, it is safe to say that one is the double of the other. This, moreover, is what emerges from the analysis of David Warrilow, who created the role in Alan Schneider's production:

With Alan Schneider, we often wondered who the reciter was and if it was his double who was listening. It is just before dying, at the moment when we are led to look at everything that memory has recorded, from the beginning, that we really see ourselves, that we recognize ourselves. I always thought the Ohio Impromptu described that moment⁴. (my translation) (cited by Hubert 41)

As Warrilow argues, this doubling in *Ohio Impromptu*, which is synonymous with introspection, symbolises the moment when the character makes the transition from life to death. The doubling is, therefore, the harbinger of non-being, of that which can no longer be considered properly alive. The split character is absolutely alone. He is engaged in a process of listening to himself. Nevertheless, contrary to what we might think, this solipsistic refuge proves to be as unbearable as the face-to-face confrontation with the outside world. To die is still to experience suffering in the solitude of one's consciousness.

3. The voice of punishment

As soon as the character frees himself from the external universe, the impenetrability of which he has suffered long and hard, he is confronted with another universe, that of his conscience. A brief review of *Eh Joe* makes this clearer. Joe makes sure that he has severed his ties with the outside world by checking that all openings in his room are locked. As soon as he sits down again, his conscience calls out to him through his voice, which comes to him in fragments, each time announced by a movement of the camera towards his face. The first fragment is the verbal expression of what Joe has just described in his gestures. It is his fundamental desire to withdraw from the outside world and be alone:

Woman's voice :

Joe ...

(*Eyes open, resumption of intentness.*)

Joe ...

(*Full intentness.*)

Thought of everything? ... Forgotten nothing? ... You're all right now, eh? ... No one can see you now No one can get

at you now Why don't you put out that light? ... There might be a louse watching you Why don't you go to bed?

.... What's wrong with that bed, Joe? ... You changed it, didn't you? ... Made no difference? ... Or is the heart already?

... Crumbles when you lie down in the dark Dry rotten at last Eh Joe? (362)

In the second fragment, the voice suggests that Joe must listen to himself: "Come on, Joe, no one can say it like you, say it again and listen to yourself" (362). The self-listening to which the voice invites Joe is nothing other than listening to the voice itself, which emanates from his head. Joe enters into communion with himself.

The relationship between man and the universe is thus transformed into a relationship between man and himself. If life brings Joe face to face with the physical world, in the face of which he feels an unalterable mal de vivre, the transition to death brings him face to face with his mental space. To better understand the link between the character and his mental space, it is necessary to understand the general content of this voice as an embodiment of this space. Whether in *Eh Joe*, *That Time*, *Rockaby*, *Footfalls* or *Ohio Impromptu*, the observation is the same. The voice evokes events that the character to whom it is addressed experienced.

The voice speaking to Joe reminds him of their love affair: "like those summer evenings in the Green ... In the early days Of our idyll When we sat watching the ducks ... Holding hands exchanging vows ... How you admired my elocution! ... Among other charms." (*Eh Joe*, 363). She also mentions a young girl who committed suicide because of Joe: "Warm summer night All sleeping Sitting on the edge of her bed in her lavender slip You know the one ... Ah she knew you, heavenly powers" (365).

In *That Time*, the three snatches of voice (A, B and C) that reach the Sovereign's face also remind him of significant events in his recent past. Voice A recounts childhood memories: "That time you went back that last time to look was the ruin still there where you hid as a child when was that" (388). Voice B evokes love affairs: "On the stone together in the sun on the stone at the edge of turning yellow vowing every now and then you

⁴ Avec Alan Schneider, on s'est souvent demandé qui était le récitant et si c'était son double qui l'écoutait. C'est juste avant de mourir, au moment où on est amené à regarder tout ce que la mémoire a enregistré, depuis le commencement, que l'on se voit réellement soi-même, que l'on se reconnaît. J'ai toujours pensé que *l'Impromptu d'Ohio* décrivait ce moment-là.

loved each other just a murmur" (388). Voice C returns to the Sovereign's cultural life: 'When you went in out of the train always winter then always raining that time in the Portrait Gallery in off the street out of the cold and rain slipped in when no one was looking' (388).

The recorded voice that the woman in *Rockaby* listens to also plunges her into the world of memories. It recalls the journey the woman has taken since she decided to withdraw from the world. From giving up movement to settling in the lullaby where her mother died, via the decision to stop wandering and seeing, the voice reviews the stages of the woman's life.

The mental universe, we are tempted to say, is a space of memories. It's as if part of the character's life has been recorded and kept intact in his consciousness, waiting for the right moment to attack him. Furthermore, if we accept that the character's withdrawal from consciousness is indicative of a state of hallucination, and therefore an anomaly, it is clear that the memories are not the result of his own will. It is not the character who is trying to reconnect with his past, but it is the past that is imposing itself on him without him having the means to turn away from it.

In *Ohio Impromptu*, we see how the reality that a man strives to forget pursues him relentlessly through the memory that arises when he least expects it. This is the story of a man who, after the death of his wife, moves elsewhere in order to ease his suffering by avoiding anything that might remind him of the happy times he had spent with his wife. However, one night, his late beloved, who warned him in a dream not to move, sends a man in a long black coat to read him his own story until daybreak, when he disappears. This envoy of the woman returned from time to time to read the sad story back to the man until one morning, when he does not leave and remains seated in front of him for good without saying anything.

This image of the absent person's envoy, sitting in front of the person to whom he is sending a message of remembrance, symbolises man's confrontation with his past. The mental universe in which things happen escapes the constraints of temporality, because it is not entirely situated in the zone of existence proper, which is governed by time and space. This is why the envoy never leaves the man. He must remain eternally before him, constantly reminding him of a part of his life that he no longer wishes to remember.

Like the man who is forced to confront his traumatic past once and for all, Joe is eternally exposed to the torments of his past. The voice he hears is that of his past, which he would like to forget. What's more, it addresses him in a reproachful tone that borders on tyranny: "Anyone living sorry for you now? ... [...] Watch yourself you don't run short, Joe ... Ever think of that?" (*Eh Joe*, 363).

In *Ohio Impromptu*, the past imposes itself definitively on the individual by making itself a corporeal and eternal presence before him. In *Eh Joe*, it is so unpleasant that Joe ends up sinking into a trauma before disappearing, while the voice, more persecutory than ever, is still heard.

Although it comes from deep within the character's psyche, the voice remains strange to him. He finds it hard to accept that the past, raised before him in the form of a voice or a silent body, is fundamentally his own. We understand thus why the voice that reaches the woman in *Rockaby* is addressed to her in the third person singular, as if it were talking about someone else. Each time the voice falls silent after evoking a sequence from the woman's life, she demands that it reveal more by crying out "more". It's not that the woman enjoys listening to the voice's revelations. On the contrary, it is because she finds it hard to believe that what the voice is saying is really what she experienced. Thus, she needs as many revelations as possible, since none of those made by the voice seems to be able to convince her that this is her own story.

The mental space is thus a world of its own with almost the same characteristics as the universe outside. It is both strange and eternal. Beckett seems to be alluding here to the thought of Leibniz, who sees the mind as an autonomous, infinite and eternal universe:

Every spirit being like a separate world, sufficient in itself, independent of any other creature, enveloping the infinite, expressing the universe, is as durable, as subsisting, and as absolute as the universe of creatures itself⁵. (my translation) (cited by Bernard 14)

The undesirable memories the voice carries, combined with the tyrannical impulse it exudes and its eternal nature, make the mental space a veritable place of punishment. Withdrawal into this abstract zone inevitably exposes the character to another eternity of suffering, visibly more unfortunate than that experienced in the external universe. Unlike the physical universe, which has no direct effect on the character, even though it silently drains him of his strength, the psychic space has a direct and instantaneous effect on him through the despotic voice.

Moreover, at this stage of his existence, the character is truly stripped of all his possibilities, including that of saying or doing banalities. He is sometimes forbidden to move, to speak, as evidenced by the immobility of his fragmented body and the deathly silence in which he has walled himself up. He is therefore reduced by

⁵ Tout esprit étant comme un monde à part, suffisant à lui-même, indépendant de toute autre créature, enveloppant l'infini, exprimant l'univers, est aussi durable, aussi subsistant, et aussi absolu que l'univers même des créatures.

force of circumstance to a physical and psychic dimension so restricted that he can only mercilessly endure the bullying of the voice of his psychological space. What makes this punishment more pronounced is man's absolute solitude. His psychic universe has no opening to the outside world. This hermetic confinement eliminates any possibility of intrusion or escape of any kind.

In life, the Beckettian character suffers because he is confronted with a disconcerting physical universe that not only renders futile his efforts to give meaning to his life and escape the absurd, but subjects him to a slow and irreversible disintegration. As he dies, he suffers even more, because he comes up against the devastating force of his mental universe, into which he withdraws and which is as strange as it is tyrannical. These two observations lead us to wonder what he will become when he dies completely, or quite simply what it means for him to die for good.

II. Conclusion

The analysis of the voice that is heard in Beckett's 'dramaticules' confirms the hypothesis that we posed in the introduction to this work. Indeed, through this singular dramatic process (a figure listening to an anonymous voice), Beckett shows in a more concrete way, and with economy of means, the damnation of the human being. This oppressive voice is the continuation of the metaphysical trajectory of the Beckettian character doomed inexorably to a descent into hell. The frightening universe to which the characters desperately oppose useless talks in the first part of Beckett's theatre is followed, in the 'dramaticules', by the punishment of the mental space of which the voice is an emanation. It is therefore the past and present life of the dying character which takes shape through the persecutory voice which forces the character to listen. As much as speaking to fill the silence of the awful space is unbearable, listening to yourself, without wanting to, proves painful. The total confinement of the character and his inability to act and say give a particularly tragic character to his existential situation which is aggravated by the oppressive nature of the voice that nothing seems to be able to silence.

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