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'The Absence of Origin': Beckett and Contemporary French Philosophy

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In 1964 Ruby Cohn remarked that 'when Beckett turned from English to French as a writing language, his protagonists turned from a kind of Logical Positivism to a kind of Existentialism' (Cohn, 1964, p. 175). The landscape of Beckett criticism has changed considerably since the 1960s, yet there remains for critics a productive tension in Beckett's work between the empiricist underpinning of Anglo-American analytic philosophy and the more phenomenologically orientated philosophy characteristic of the European continent. The shift that Cohn identifies in Beckett's work runs parallel with the writer's move away from the anxiety regarding the relationship between language and the world that we see particularly in the novel *Watt*, to a greater exploration of the subject that inhabits that world, an exploration given powerful expression in the subsequent trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. With his increasing focus on the nature of subjectivity, albeit a subjectivity in dissolution, Beckett interrogates the relation between the subject and the body that gives it a place within the impoverished yet enduring world that he has made his own.

Beckett's philosophical background was informed by the writings of René Descartes, Arnold Geulincx, George Berkeley, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Fritz Mauthner. Through these thinkers Beckett explored his attitude to language and to the speaking subject. In turn, Beckett's writing has had significant impact on the development of contemporary thought, particularly in France, where Beckett made his home. The relationship between contemporary French philosophy and Beckett's writing is one of profound influence. Philosophers such as Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, and Alain Badiou have developed their thought within a context informed by Beckett's writing, and have written perceptively on his prose and drama. Other philosophers have been influenced by Beckett, but have not engaged directly with his writing. In *Acts of Literature*, Jacques Derrida explains that because he feels so close to Beckett, indeed

identifies with the author, he has sought to avoid writing directly on him:

[Beckett] is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close. Precisely because of this proximity, it is too hard for me, too easy and too hard. (Derrida, 1992b, p. 60)

Critics such as Steven Connor, Leslie Hill, Carla Locatelli, Simon Critchley, and David Watson have elaborated rich and productive readings of Beckett through the philosophies of Deleuze, Blanchot, and Derrida. This work is continued by the criticism of Mary Bryden, Lois Oppenheim, Richard Begam, Anthony Uhlmann, and Andrew Gibson, who have demonstrated the importance of contemporary French philosophy, including the work of Lyotard and Badiou, for our readings of Beckett. Recent publications on Beckett and philosophy include Richard Lane's collection *Beckett and Philosophy* which includes essays that explore Beckett's work in the context of German and French thought, and Lois Oppenheim's collection *Samuel Beckett Studies* which includes a cogent and succinct overview of poststructuralist engagement with Beckett's work, 'Poststructuralist Readings of Beckett', by Leslie Hill.

This chapter examines the productive relationship between literature and philosophy, tracing the key ideas that inform Beckett's work and the ways in which these ideas are central to the French philosophy that developed in Beckett's wake. Forged within a similar cultural nexus, both writer and philosophers pursue questions of epistemology and ontology within an exploration of the nature and function of language. Rather than providing an overview of the philosophical terrain (one that has been excellently mapped in Lane's and Oppenheim's editions) I will focus on a particular topography by arguing that both Beckett and key French thinkers such as Deleuze, Lyotard, Derrida, Blanchot, and Badiou seek to establish an understanding of subjectivity that takes into consideration the somatic and contingent within the context of writing. My analysis will concentrate primarily on readings of *Watt*, *The Unnamable*, and *Company*.

Beckett's writing explores and embodies the problematics of language conceived as a differential, abstract structure. He develops a distinctive literature which destabilizes language and conflates meaning with manifestation. Gilles Deleuze has responded to Beckett's work on a number of occasions. His praise for Beckett's only venture into film-making, 'The Greatest Irish Film (Beckett's "Film")', analyzes Beckett's engagement with Berkeley's argument that to be is to be perceived (*esse est percipi*) through a cinema characterized by 'action, perception, and affection' (Deleuze, 1998, p. 26). Most significant for Deleuze, however, is Beckett's use of language and the ways in which he complicates the relation between language and reality.

In his essay 'He Stuttered', Deleuze takes Beckett's novel *Watt* as an example of a literary work in which 'the transfer from the form of expression to the form of the content has been completed' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 26). Deleuze cites the mathematical permutations in *Watt* as an example of Beckett's 'art of the inclusive disjunction', an art which 'no longer chooses but rather affirms the disjointed terms in their distance and, without limiting or excluding one disjunct by means of another, it criss-crosses and runs through the entire gamut of possibilities' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 26). The reverse transition from the form of the content to the form of the expression whereby 'people speak as they walk or stumble' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 26) is completed in *Watt* for 'As Watt walked, so now he talked, back to front' (Beckett, 1981, p. 162). Deleuze argues persuasively that it is only a disequilibrium language like Beckett's that can incorporate such inclusive permutations, a language in which '*disjunctions become included and inclusive and connections become reflexive* on the basis of a rolling gait that affects the process of language and no longer the flow of discourse' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 26). The rolling gait with which the protagonist Watt approaches Mr Knott's house (Beckett, 1981, p. 28) is emulated by Beckett's writing so that 'it is as if the entire language had begun to roll from left to right, and to toss from back to front' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 26). In Mr Knott's house Watt's control over the conventional structure of language breaks down. His speech undergoes a fundamental change as grammar and syntax are disregarded. The phonetic subtleties of pronunciation and enunciation are subsumed beneath a flow of speech '*at once so rapid and so slow*' (Beckett, 1981, p. 154). The linguistic transformation of Watt's speech intensifies towards the end of this novel until language itself begins 'to vibrate and to stutter' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 24). The formal organization of language disintegrates and since 'syntax is constituted by means of the curves, links, bends, and deviations of this dynamic line as it passes by positions with a double perspective on disjunctions and on connections', Deleuze concludes that

It is no longer the formal or superficial syntax that presides over the equilibrium of language, but syntax in the process of becoming, a veritable creation of a syntax that gives birth to a foreign language within language and a grammar of disequilibrium. (Deleuze, 1994, p. 27)

In *Watt*, Beckett begins to subject language to the kind of stress that leads to a progressive and creative disorganization. He starts with a series of permutations, such as the 12 possibilities of Mr Knott's dinner arrangements (Beckett, 1981, p. 86) or the wonderful passage on human sexuality:

Not that it is by any means impossible for a man to be both a man's man and a woman's man, or for a woman to be both a woman's woman and a man's woman, almost in the same breath. For with men and women,

with men's men and women's men, with men's women and women's women, with men's and women's men, with men's and women's women, all is possible, as far as can be ascertained, in this connexion. (Beckett, 1981, p. 138)

This breathless passage approaches the condition described above by Deleuze as 'the art of the inclusive disjunction' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 26). Though it explores the possible positions of each linguistic element, this passage still maintains the position of each relative to the other. It conserves the structure of elements through which sense is produced, a structure which is, as Deleuze explains in *The Logic of Sense*, 'a machine for the production of incorporeal sense' (Deleuze, 1990, p. 71). In the latter part of this novel Beckett moves towards a more complex series of permutations in which the inner structure of each linguistic element is subject to recombination. These linguistic contortions strain the thin line of sense that separates the corporeal from the incorporeal. The language of *Watt* is, for Deleuze, 'the nonsense of the word devoid of sense, which is decomposed into phonetic elements' (Deleuze, 1990, p. 90). It retains the ability to separate the 'pure "expressed" of words' and the 'logical attribute of bodies' (Deleuze, 1990, p. 91). Although resulting from 'the actions and passions of the body' it differs in nature, being neither action nor passion (Deleuze, 1990, p. 91). Most importantly, it continues to prevent confusion between sonorous language and the physical body. Though it does not possess any particular meaning, this nonsense is opposed to the absence of meaning, it is 'that which has no sense, and that which, as such and as it enacts the donation of sense, is opposed to the absence of sense' (Deleuze, 1990, p. 71). This sense about which Deleuze speaks is not a 'Principle, Reservoir, Reserve' or 'Origin' (Deleuze, 1990, p. 72) which must be rediscovered or restored. It is something 'to produce by a new machinery', something which 'belongs to no height or depth, but rather to a surface effect, being inseparable from the surface which is its proper dimension' (Deleuze, 1990, p. 72).

Through the eyes of Watt's interlocutor Sam we witness the development of a foreign language within language as Watt dislocates linguistic rules and conventions while he advances backwards through the undergrowth of Mr Knott's garden, responding to Sam's cry of concern with the rather disconcerting retort: 'Not it is, yes' (Beckett, 1981, p. 157). This short phrase causes Sam 'more alarm, more pain, than if [he] had received, unexpectedly, at close quarters, a charge of small shot in the ravine' (Beckett, 1981, p. 157). It would seem from this and previous examples that Watt's language has deteriorated into nonsense. The appropriate sounds are still intact, but Watt's disregard for the basic elements of semantic organization would suggest that his speech has become meaningless, as this response indicates, 'ot bro, lap rulb, krad klub' (Beckett, 1981, p. 163). However this is not necessarily so. While at first Watt's sounds are 'devoid of significance' (Beckett, 1981, p. 163) for Sam,

gradually they begin to make sense, as he explains how 'soon I grew used to these sounds, and then I understood as well as before, that is to say a great part of what I heard' (Beckett, 1981, p. 163). This pattern of incomprehension and understanding is repeated as Watt processes through eight stages of permutation:

This further modification Watt carried through with all his usual discretion and sense of what was acceptable to the ear, and aesthetic judgment. Nevertheless to one, such as me, desirous above all of information, the change was not a little disconcerting. (Beckett, 1981, p. 163)

Linguistic communication as a continuous, dynamic process makes possible the dialogue between the characters of Sam and Watt in the latter part of the novel. Watt presents Sam with an initially unintelligible phrase. Sam can choose to ignore or respond to that phrase. Either way, Sam is required to engage with the phrase, to recognize the other even if it is to recognize the radical alterity of the other. This interactive view of language, in which a phrase is something to engage with rather than grasp, is discussed by Jean-François Lyotard in his study *The Differend*. Lyotard proposes a view of language somewhat similar to Wittgenstein's language game. For Lyotard, the elemental unit of an analysis of language is the phrase, which cannot be doubted, 'What escapes doubt is that there is at least one phrase, [...]'. *There is no phrase is a phrase*' (Lyotard, 1988, p. 65). The phrase cannot be ignored for 'it is necessary to link onto a phrase that happens (be it by silence, which is a phrase), there is no possibility of not linking onto it' (Lyotard, 1988, p. 29). Within this context we understand how Sam must respond to Watt's utterances, even if this response is silence. But the novel allows for no predetermined response. There are no rules of the game, as Lyotard explains, 'to link is necessary; how to link is contingent' (Lyotard, 1988, p. 29). The importance of Lyotard's work for a reading of Beckett lies in his recognition of the necessity of language while dislocating the structure of language. While critics such as Watson and Hill situate Beckett's writing in an impasse caused by its continuous impulse to move beyond language within language, a reading of Beckett through Deleuze and Lyotard makes it possible to argue that the dissolution of a structured discursive language that Beckett effects in his writing does not imply the dissolution of language. On the contrary, it transforms language into a dynamic pragmatics the focus of which is not the transmission of a preexistent meaning, but the development of linguistic interaction which requires the recognition of the other.

In *Watt* Beckett interrogates this concept of language, forcing his protagonist beyond that unitary shared structure in order to, as Beckett writes in his 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, 'get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it' (Beckett, 1983, p. 171). Watt's passage through Mr Knott's house traces the disintegration of the notion of language as a shared structure of

conventions. In *Watt* the separation of sounds from bodies necessary for language is undone. On the ground floor of Mr Knott's house, language loses its powers of designation, manifestation, and signification. On the first floor, the distinction between the linguistic and the physical is blurred. The moment Watt enters Mr Knott's house, his language 'is stripped of its sense, its *phonetic elements* become singularly wounding. The word no longer expresses an attribute of the state of affairs; its fragments merge with unbearable sonorous qualities' (Deleuze, 1990, p. 88). Here, language as a differential, abstracted structure is reincorporated into the physical. The constituents of differentiation – the sentences, words, and syllables – break free from their allocated places within the language. The line of sense which separates propositions from things is erased and a causal connection between the word and the thing is established. The abstract linguistic or semiotic machine breaks down and Watt is faced with a choice: he can either recover meaning, or destroy the word (Deleuze, 1990, p. 88). The former involves an alliance with structure and differentiation; existence on the surface where sound is separated from the body and organized into propositions (Deleuze, 1990, p. 181). The latter transforms 'the word into an action by rendering it incapable of being decomposed and incapable of disintegrating' (Deleuze, 1990, p. 89). It is language without articulation, without differentiation, what Deleuze calls the language of depth. With *Watt* Beckett effects the disintegration of language as an abstract differential structure and indicates a line of development that works towards a use of language which includes the somatic and material aspects of language, and locates the linguistic instance within the particular rather than the abstract.

Watt signals Beckett's development of what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'minor literature'. In this novel Beckett begins to write in a minor language, a language made foreign within itself, a language that flees from any constant relationship of linguistic variables. A minor language makes the major language vibrate, placing it in a state of continuous variation 'as in music, where the minor mode refers to dynamic combinations in a state of perpetual disequilibrium' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 25). This disequilibrated language subverts the major language while subsisting within it. *Watt* marks the beginning of Beckett's movement towards a literature that engages with the material as well as the abstract nature of language. It is a literature which, in Lyotard's terms, incorporates the figural within the discursive, at times privileging the graphic and sonic aspect of language over the signifiatory aspect. However, this prioritization of the material over the structural aspects of language serves to problematize issues of subjectivity and translation which are central to language and meaning, and fundamental to Beckett's work.¹

Deleuze refines his approach to Beckett's use of language in a later work, 'The Exhausted', by dividing Beckett's language into three categories that describe the writer's development. Language I is a language of names

in which 'enumeration replaces propositions and combinatorial relations replace syntactic relations' (Deleuze, 1998, p. 156). This language, for Deleuze, characterizes Beckett's early work, particularly novels like *Molloy* and *Watt*. Language II is a language of voices rather than names, 'a language that no longer operates with combinable atoms but with blendable flows' (Deleuze, 1998, p. 156). This is the language of Beckett's middle period, beginning with *The Unnamable* and its concern with the exhaustion of words, the attainment of silence. Deleuze proposes that 'to exhaust the possible in this new sense, the problem of exhaustive series must be confronted anew, even if it means falling into an "aporia"' (Deleuze, 1998, p. 157). The third category of language, Language III, is 'no longer a language of names or voices but a language of images' (Deleuze, 1998, p. 159). These images occupy a non-significatory space which prioritizes the material aspect of the word poised between voice and silence. Echoing Olga Bernal's characterization of Beckett's writing as a '*chute hors du langage*' (Bernal, pp. 17-30), Deleuze describes this third language as an 'outside of language' (Deleuze, 1998, p. 160). The paradox of a silence made possible through speech is an aporia that animates much of Beckett's work. Such a silence carries with it a notion of necessary engagement for, as Lyotard emphasizes in *The Differend*, silence is also a phrase which carries the same ethical demands for response (Lyotard, 1988, p. 29). However, the condition of Beckett's silence is also an impossibility since, in John Cage's words, there 'is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot' (Cage, p. 8).

As Deleuze underlines in 'The Exhausted', the risks of falling into aporia are never more apparent than in *The Unnamable*. The novel is characterized by a rhetoric of paradox and aporia centered on the interrelationship between speech and silence which invokes notions of duty and passage. In *The Other Heading*, Derrida uses the term 'aporia' for a duty which duplicates and negates itself, 'a double, contradictory imperative' (Derrida, 1992a, p. 79). The imperative about which Derrida writes in his study *Aporias* 'puts to test a passage, both an impossible and a necessary passage, and two apparently heterogeneous borders' (Derrida, 1993, p. 17). Beckett's aporia is an imperative which involves the passage of language between differential structure and visceral force, a passage which is at once impossible and obligatory. The penumbral with which the unnamable has been charged requires him to speak in order to be silent. It requires that 'in this churn of words' (Beckett, 1975, p. 27) he find something, some truth, that has not been said before. It is an epistemological challenge centered on identity in which the speaker must establish 'what I am, where I am, whether I am words among words, or silence in the midst of silence' (Beckett, 1975, p. 106). Words and silence form the boundaries inside which the unnamable tries to 'reconstitute the right lesson' (Beckett, 1975, p. 27). They trace the lines of passage from which the unnamable speaks.

The aporia that Beckett explores in *The Unnamable* can be understood through Derrida, who argues that it is 'not necessarily a failure or a simple paralysis, the sterile negativity of the impasse. It is neither stopping at it nor overcoming it' (Derrida, 1993, p. 32). This aporetic text takes as its point of departure the realization that the abstract systematic structure of language which underwrites meaning and subjectivity is no longer tenable. The opening statement, 'Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving', at once affirms the necessity and impossibility of establishing the coordinates of location, identity, and time within a language in which the value of the term depends entirely on the other terms in the system (Beckett, 1975, p. 7). The speaker says 'I', unbelieving, for the first-person pronoun does not have any value in itself within such a system of language. It is only in the act of enunciation that the deictic signifier can operate, and it does so by providing a point of passage between virtual signification and actual designation. This movement from signification to designation disrupts the containment of language and threatens the stability of subjectivity. It is a passage at once necessary and impossible, for in order to posit oneself as a subject one must say 'I', but the very enunciation of this deictic pierces the virtual plane of language and introduces the particular contingencies of location, identity, and time which depend on the body in space.

The aporia about which the unnamable speaks is a duty to transgress the borders between word and world. Yet it is an impossible duty, for in so doing he dismantles the discrete structure upon which his subjectivity is founded. The passage between the virtual and the actual is 'the difficult or the impracticable [...] the impossible passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage' (Derrida, 1993, p. 8). It is a passage which threatens the subjectivity of the unnamable and which can only be refused by a rejection of the 'I' which marks its point of entry. But this passage is also a 'nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the event of a coming' (Derrida, 1993, p. 8). This something else is the opening up of language to the conditions of its emergence. It is the inclusion of the corporeal with the linguistic; an acknowledgement of the inextricability of the visceral and the abstract without which speech and subjectivity are impossible: 'in the midst of silence, its great swell rears towards me, I'm streaming with it, it's an image, those are words, it's a body, it's not I, I knew it wouldn't be I, I'm not outside, I'm inside' (Beckett, 1975, p. 128). It is only when those two poles of aporia, silence and speech, are joined that the unnamable can speak of location, identity, and resolution:

in the end I'll recognise it, the story of the silence that he never left, that I should never have left, that I may never find again, that I may find again, then it will be he, it will be I, it will be the place, the silence, the end, the beginning [...]. (Beckett, 1975, p. 131)

Maurice Blanchot's influential article on Beckett 'Where now/ Who now?' (1953) brings the questions raised by *The Unnamable* to the heart of literature itself. Conflating author and narrator, Blanchot focuses on the impossibility of authorship arguing that

the man who writes is already no longer Samuel Beckett but the necessity which has displaced him, [...] which has made him a nameless being, The Unnamable, a being without being, who can neither live nor die, neither begin nor leave off, the empty site in which an empty voice is raised without effect, masked for better or worse by a porous and agonizing I. (Blanchot, 2000, p. 97)

Blanchot explores the aporetic situation presented by Beckett's writing through the idea of origin which, as Gary Banham explains, 'is the space of the middle between words and world. This space opens and the divide or cut which is experienced through the word as creating the world speaks and says I' (Banham, p. 60).

Beckett's late novel *Company* explores the origin of writing. It seeks to reach that point before the artifices of character and story, that point before even the very voice which allows writing to speak. But this movement toward the origin is an impossibility because, as Maurice Blanchot explores in *The Infinite Conversation*, 'the origin itself, excluding in its unrecoverable anteriority all that is born of it, is, not being, but rather what turns away from it – the harsh breach of the void out of which everything arises and into which everything sinks and gives way' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 404). Blanchot's conception of the origin depends upon a repetition and impossibility which is characteristic of Beckett's writing. It is an origin which separates birth and death only by the harsh breach which is life. This breach is described in *Waiting for Godot* by a furious Pozzo who exclaims, 'They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more' (Beckett, 1990, p. 83). The origin is conceived by Blanchot as the center which is 'the absence of any center, since it is there that the thrust of all unity comes to be shattered: in some sense the non-center of non-unity' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 404). However, this non-center and non-unity does not cancel out the center and unity, nor does it abolish the origin. Instead, it describes a tension between the absence and presence of these impossible poles, which maintains the origin 'under the harsh interrogation of the absence of origin, which, as soon as the origin poses as the cause, the reason, and the word for the enigma, immediately deposes it and speaks a more profound enigma: the Arising that, as such, sinks down, is engulfed and swallowed up' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 404). This 'harsh interrogation' is played out in Beckett's dramatic works *Play*, *Not I*, and *What Where*. It is the demand that the story be told, the insistence that there is something to tell, the search for 'what' and 'where', all of which will never be realized. Beckett's writing traces the light which gleams an instant, before interminable dark.

Like the words in *Watt* which empty themselves of signification, the words with which this fable is told are 'inane' (Beckett, 1992, p. 51). Whereas the speaker of *The Unnamable* is all words, made of words, the speaker of *Company* seeks the end of words in order, finally, to be alone, to be the singular 'I':

With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were. Alone. (Beckett, 1992, pp. 51–2)

But this solitude can only be achieved through words, and indeed, the one who is 'alone' is never alone for there is still, in this last passage of *Company*, a voice which speaks. The 'you' who hears 'how words are coming to an end' is still in the company of the one who speaks those words. The word 'Alone' which announces the solitude of the figure is spoken by another, thereby introducing company. The solitude and silence which the 'I' of Beckett's writing always seeks is an impossibility for, as Blanchot emphasizes, the act of writing makes an other of the 'I': 'to write is to pass from "I" to "he"' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 380). The narrative 'he' marks the intrusion of the other. *Company* seeks to abolish the intrusion of the 'he'. It tries to join the 'you' of the voice with the 'he' of the figure through the utterance of the 'I' in the act of remembrance: 'I remember' (Beckett, 1992, p. 28). To reach the 'I' is to reach the origin of the fable, the point from which the story starts. This point is also the silence which all of Beckett's narrators seek. But writing can never abolish the multiplicity of the 'I' and the other, for it is only through this distinction between the 'I' and that which is other to the 'I' that the act of narration can emerge. Once again, as Leslie Hill points out, the words of *Company* are 'attributed to another, to a voice that cannot be made present and which disperses into a multiplicity of idiom from which unity, in the shape of the first-person pronoun, has been removed, detached, subtracted' (Hill, 1990, p. 160). The narrative voice of *Company* is the voice which in the very act of speaking becomes other. It 'has no place in the work', speaking only from a 'kind of void in the work' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 385). This is the same void from which the narrator of *The Unnamable* speaks, 'Two holes [...]. Or a single one, entrance and exit, where the words swarm and jostle like ants, [...]' (Beckett, 1975, p. 72), and again, 'there must be a hole for the voices' (Beckett, 1975, p. 76). The origin of writing is this void, and from it comes 'the narrative voice, a neutral voice that speaks the work from out of this place without a place, where the work is silent' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 385).

Alain Badiou's work on Beckett picks up traces of Deleuze's and Blanchot's thought. Echoing both philosophers, Badiou argues that the role of the voice in Beckett's writing 'is to track down – by way of a great deal of fables, narrative fictions, and concepts – the pure point of enunciation' (Badiou, p. 52). The movement of Beckett's voice is dual: it proliferates (as we have seen in *Watt*), or

it exhausts itself (as we see toward the end of *The Unnamable*, and *Company*) – ‘it stammers, repeats itself, inventing nothing’ (Badiou, p. 52). For Badiou, Beckett’s writing is characterized by the substitution of ‘the question “how are we to name what happens?” for the question “what is the meaning of what is?”’ (Badiou, p. 55). This shift, from the kind of hermeneutic anxiety that we find in *Watt* to a broader engagement with ontological questions as they center around the dilemma of the name (which gains particular focus in *The Unnamable*), is explained by Badiou in terms of what he describes as the event. What happens in Beckett for Badiou is a ‘supernumerary, incalculable, indiscernible, undecidable event – irreducible to all established protocols of being, nameable only as something ill seen and ill said, of which all that can be said is missaid’ (Hill, 2004, p. 81). Resisting both presentation and representation, the event inaugurates a process of subtraction that approaches the singularity of the name, but is limited by unnamability: it ‘becomes possible as a Beckettian process of repudiation, denial and *ascesis* moves towards its completion’ (Gibson, 2002, p. 100). Blanchot’s non-center or non-unity can be understood also in terms of Badiou’s idea of the void which, as Andrew Gibson argues, is closely linked with the idea of infinity: ‘Badiou sees Beckett as concerned with “the fictive place of being”. He conceives of the “place” as precisely the point at which language arrests what is otherwise the infinite “flight” [*fuite*] of being towards the void’ (Gibson, 2005, p. 155). Badiou’s idea of the void has particular relevance to my argument about the voice in *Company* as a movement toward a union of the narrator and the act of narration, or the teller and the told, through which literature is possible. In ‘Being, Existence, Thought: Prose and Concept’ Badiou describes the void as that point of union since

The void ‘in itself’ is what cannot be ill said. This is its definition. The void *cannot but be said*. In it, the saying and the said coincide, which prohibits ill saying. Such a coincidence finds its reason in the fact that the void itself is nothing but its own name. (Badiou, p. 99)

Badiou’s readings of Beckett depart from those of his precursors in that he swaps meaning for truth, shifting the focus from epistemology to ethics. In this he heralds a new way of thinking about the engagement of philosophy and literature, which is characterized by what Gibson describes as a ‘thought of intermittency’ most fully explored by Badiou and the writings of Jacques Rancière and Françoise Proust (Gibson, 2005, p. 137). A new direction for a new century.

Note

1. See Jean-François Lyotard’s *Discours, figure*. In this important work, Lyotard argues for the co-existence of line and letter, of the plastic and the textual. This holding together of heterogeneous plastic and graphic spaces without privileging either,

Lyotard calls the ‘figural’. The figural is not alternative to the textual, for it moves within both textual and visual space. Just as the letter, while repressing its corporeality, cannot function without the line, so the line cannot be reduced to pure corporeality, since it contains the potential for arbitrary signification, by demarcating one space in relation to another (Lyotard, 1985).

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Part II

Encounters with Literature in Anglo-American Philosophy

Introduction

From the early twentieth century, philosophy in Britain and America came to be dominated by the analytic tradition, to the extent that 'analytic philosophy' and 'Anglo-American philosophy' practically became synonyms. The analytic tradition has consistently tended to focus on linguistic philosophy, which it approaches using methods of analysis derived from logic. Those who practise analytic philosophy apply an almost mathematical exactitude in unpacking the propositions of everyday language. Its earliest advocates included Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), G.E. Moore (1873–1958), and Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947). W.V.O. Quine (1908–2000), H.P. Grice (1913–88), P.F. Strawson (1919–), and Saul Kripke (1940–), amongst many others, have featured amongst the leading contemporary practitioners of Anglo-American philosophy. Yet despite the foundational importance of figures such as Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) – German and Austrian, respectively – analytic philosophy has nevertheless increasingly been contrasted with 'Continental' philosophy, on a shaky assumption that the former is a largely Anglophone enterprise.

With its scrutiny of language in terms of logical forms and structures, its emphasis on ordinary language (which some have opposed to literary language), and its eagerness to resolve all linguistic ambiguity using ever more rigorous logical precision, analytic philosophy might not appear to have a great deal in common with the way most people go about reading literature today. Interestingly enough, though, both analytic philosophy and English literature rose to prominence as academic disciplines at roughly the same time. The Cambridge of Moore, Wittgenstein, and Russell was also the Cambridge of F.R. Leavis. Tellingly, Leavis was particularly adamant that the study of great literature should be kept free from the theoretical, mathematical, and logical models that his colleagues in the Cambridge philosophy department brought to their study of language. Arguably, this was

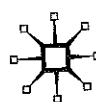
Literature and Philosophy

A Guide to Contemporary Debates

Edited by

David Rudrum

palgrave
macmillan



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*For Tracey,
at last*

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