Beckett and Joyce. Dialectical Reciprocity

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Abstract: Beckett’s literary beginnings are undoubtedly linked to his friendship and worship of James Joyce, his fellow Irishman, also established in Paris, whose literary work he enjoys and thoroughly studies. There are many similarities between James Joyce’s work and Samuel Beckett’s, taking into account the fact that the latter has been, in his youth, a sort of literary apprentice, their friendship being one of the main reasons in the dialectical study of their creations. What interests us most is the critical aligning of some fractures from their writings, in order to find the junction of themes and structure, the way in which Beckett takes Joyce’s leitmotivs and transforms them, filtering them into personal marks of his style.

Although Beckett detaches himself, in a way, from the influence of his master, by adopting French as his primary language of creation, but also by channeling his efforts into playwright, instead of prose, there are recurrences from Joyce now and then, especially in his late writings. Theoretical studies emphasize a common preoccupation for limit in their maturity works, perceived as a climax of the author’s experience with his work.

That is to say these Irishmen’s creations are, in a way, complementary, becoming proof of the literary transgression of the first half of the XXth century, from the canonized form and structure of realism, existentialism or naturalism, to a personal and free way of seeing the world, materialized into postmodernism.

Key words: Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, theatre, Worstward Ho, Finnegans’s Wake, limit, absurd, postmodernism

James Augustine Aloysius Joyce is one of the foremost figures in literature in the XXth century. Born in Dublin, on the 2nd of February 1882, the young Joyce will astonish his contemporaries through his intellectual-artistic numerous skills, remarking himself not only in literature, but also in music, especially in the first part of his life. Although he comes from a middleclass family, this Dubliner succeeds in spacing himself from the highly unstable background of his childhood (an alcoholic father, a certain catholic

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education, the chaos of a distorted affection received from his parent, caused by his numerous love affairs), becoming one of the most capable students from O’Connell School and later from University College in Dublin, where he takes English, French and Italian classes. Also during his college years he will have begun working on the novel *Stephen Hero*, which will later become *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, novel which shall establish, alongside the autobiographical coordinate, the premises of modern-avant-garde literature, by relativizing the author’s perspective over his own creation. Also, in this creation one can perceive the primary contours of the Joycean style, in other words, the *stream of consciousness* and the *interior monologue*, stylistic marks in his works. Of course, his literary mastery is at its peak in *Ulysses*, novel which follows the life of Stephen Dedalus during eighteen hours, in a Dublin monographed by Joyce to the utmost detail, regardless of the fact that the Irishman had been living for some time in Paris. In the eighteen chapters of the book, following the banality and, in the same time, the exceptional life of Stephen, Joyce mocks episodes from *The Odyssey*, conjuring, in the same time, central themes from these units, representing arts, scientific branches or human organs. Also, the narration follows a different literary technique in every unit, debunking the act of creation.

Aside from *Ulysses*, Joyce surprises his readers through his maturity work, *Finnegan’s Wake*, one of his most famous and, unfortunately, unread literary works. Because of the hermetic language, abundant in neologisms, lexical inventions of the author, archaisms and dialectical expressions, the message is somewhat difficult to perceive. Also, *Finnegan’s Wake* presents a non-narrative structure, with oneiric insertions and mythological fractions, creating a high-flown experimental work which has incited, over the years, literary critics.

There are many similarities between the work of James Joyce and that of Samuel Beckett, if we think that the latter has been, in his youth, his apprentice and close collaborator, their friendship remaining one of the foremost arguments in the dialectical study of their creations. But what interests most in the critical confrontation of some textual fractions from their works is the *junction* of themes and structure, the way in which Beckett takes over and filters the leitmotivs recurrent in Joyce’s texts. Beyond the literary
interdependence of Joyce and Beckett, one may invoke a particular influence of the author of *Ulysses* on the young Samuel, especially if one takes into consideration a certain similarity in their lives: excellent student, religious rebellion, the incapacity of adapting to academic teaching, the Parisian “refuge”, in the cultural capital of Europe in the first half of the XXth century, attending avant-garde circles, including important artists of the time, such as Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot. These coincidences, as well as the Irish nationality, shall undoubtedly contribute to the artistic molding of Beckett and, we dare say, Joyce because, apart from their collaboration, or the motif of their quarrel – Lucia Joyce’s crush on young Samuel, the meeting of these two intellectuals means for Beckett a search for his own artistic identity, haunts his work and, in the same time, offers it a nationality – the Irish one.

Beckett’s literary beginning is linked to Joyce’s friendship and collaboration, whose work he worships and studies closely.

Beckett meets Joyce in 1928, when the already famous Irishman asks his young conational, who had recently left from Trinity College, to write an essay about the themes in his latest text, linking it to Italian literature; *Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce* becomes a thorough analysis not only of the literary capabilities of Joyce, but also of the stylistic concerns of Beckett. The influence of *Ulysses*’s author on Beckett is one of the predilect subjects in critical studies. Beyond their reciprocal admiration and friendship, one remarks a certain congruence of their opera. In *Beginagains Wake! Joyce and Beckett at the Limits of Late Style*, Ryan Marrinan talks about a similarity of perception of these two writers’ books, especially when reading their late texts. Considering *Finnegan’s Wake* and *Worstward Ho* as landmarks, the American critic underlines, in a dialectical study of these texts, the supra-theme of *limit*, perceived as a climax of the author’s experience regarding his opera: “First of all, lateness means extremity, which introduces the idea of limit. Joyce and Beckett, as they confront the limits of human capabilities and existence, in general, discover the limits of knowing.”

1 Ryan Marrinan – *Beginagains Wake! Joyce and Beckett at the Limits of Late Style*, Princeton University, New Jersey, 2007, p. 35.
can discuss a style of a certain existential theme, contained and refracted over
the whole opera. Because these maturity writings of the Irishmen reflect their
whole artistic demarches of each and, paradoxically, of the other. Even though
Beckett, in a bold emancipation from his “tutor” tried to distance himself from
the work of Joyce, by adopting French as his literary language, in his late texts,
he comes back to the themes abundant in Joyce’s literature. Of course, these
themes are fed to the reader through a rough filter, in the antipole of *Ulysses’*
author: “Joyce, in Beckett’s opinion, was getting to a certain ‘omniscience and
omnipotence as an artist. I work with impotence, with ignorance.’ Impotence
and ignorance are, for Beckett, an aesthetic of error and loss.”

That is to say, regardless of the different style, Joyce opting for a
thorough knowledge of his content, aiming for omniscience, Beckett being
cryptical, closed, with caduceus meanings which evaporate before finishing
reading a sentence, their creations tangentially meet, especially in the end of
their careers, foreshadowing limit and, also, universality, because: “the
repetitions form *Finnegan’s Wake* and *Worstward Ho* become a ritual of
objectified pain. […] These late works mourn themselves and their repetitive
styles alleviate the pain from their author’s disappearance.”

One may argue that Beckett, in a certain way, has always been writing
about limit, stylized into art, regarded as a stimulant of being. His characters,
even if we speak about his debut short prose, his French novels or his maturity
theatre plays, are always linked by an apparent lack of goal, lost in a ridiculous
space, having absurd preoccupations, such as preparing a sandwich following
precise obsessive-compulsive rituals (*Dante and the Lobster*), or sucking in
mathematical order small stones found on the beach (*Molloy*), or useless
frolics, while proliferating existential philosophy regarding life and death
(*Waiting for Godot*). However, the heroes of Beckettian texts give the
impression that they are preparing for an ultimate task, betrayed by their
scrupulosity of small, perfect gestures, a routine which almost translates into
philosophy, contouring a limit-situation, meant to change the cursivity of their

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tedious lives. But all the interior fuss of the characters is useless, because the cheese bought from the grocer is not stinky enough, Molloy’s travel loses its meaning and Godot never shows up. These heroes or anti-heroes, as some critics call them, never seem to touch limit, and chronicals of the time, after the debut of Samuel Beckett as playwright, underline especially this lack of action, an innovation hard to stomach by his contemporaries. Philip Hope-Wallace, for example, notes in his review of Waiting for Godot, played at Arts Theatre, directed by Peter Hall (premiered in 1955, on the 3rd of August, the first staging in English of the play): “The play, if about anything, is ostensibly about two tramps who spend the two acts, two evenings long, under a tree on a bit of waste ground ‘waiting for Godot’ […] The play bored some people acutely. Others found it a witty and poetic conundrum. […] It is good to find that plays once dubbed ‘incomprehensible and pretentious’ can still get a staging.”4 Obviously, the transgression of Beckettian themes into theatre language means an exposure lacking imperceptibly of his artistic view of the world and his proffering of resemanding the idea of theatrical, of theatre language and scenic sign cannot but create controversy. Again, we reach a similarity with Joyce, because when Ulysses appeared, Joyce too was puzzling his readers. We catch a part of dr. Jose Collins’ review from 1922: “A few intuitive, sensitive visionaries may understand and comprehend Ulysses, James Joyce's new and mammoth volume, without going through a course of training or instruction, but the average intelligent reader will glean little or nothing from it – even from careful perusal, one might properly say study, of it – save bewilderment and a sense of disgust. It should be accompanied with a key and a glossary like the Berlitz books. Then the attentive and diligent reader would eventually get some comprehension of Mr. Joyce’s message.”5 Paralleling these two references, one may observe these authors’ predilection to a sinuous, difficult approach of literary content. However, there is a distinctive difference between the creations of these authors, which we have already underlined: Beckett had a rough style, words becoming, sometimes, theatrical signs – when discussing his plays, whilst Joyce works with the

stream of consciousness, an ideologically cascade tangling the reader into an emotional lure. This tendency appears in Joyce’s texts since *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*, when the agglomeration of thought and sensations of Stephen Dedalus creates the impression of a chaotic existence for the reader.

One may observe a similar process in Beckett’s novels, when the apparently endless spread of thoughts reminds the reader of Joyce’s method, but, detaching himself from his mentor, Beckett dynamites the intellect of his characters. Not only they do not possess a precise goal, wandering absurdly through neutral sceneries, but also their thoughts seem to be borrowed, broken echoes of classical texts or Bible truncated references. By dismantling this coordinate of humanity – the rationality, by linking it to perishability, by tracing its obvious limits, Beckett succeeds in creating a new approach to artistic writing, contouring, discreetly, the poetic art contained by each and every one of his texts.

Octavian Saiu remarked the huge difference between Beckett’s novel, tributary to Joyce, and his theatre, which cannot be “fit” anywhere, strange, absconse, even genius. The intertextuality of Beckettian theatre is somewhat irrelevant, in Saiu’s opinion, when interpreting the message of his plays, because the resonance with Shakespeare, The Bible or philosophic ideas are so filtered that they lose the initial meaning. We dare to disagree, because the sole presence of these truncated references, an exercise acquired from Joyce, proves an echo of Beckett’s novel into his theatre.

One may argue, therefore, that Joyce’s craftsmanship resides in the perfect organization and detail of the human mind, following Freudian psychoanalysis, whilst Beckett refers to the inverted method, by depicting everything that incites and surrounds the human mind. His characters seem to lack psychology and solely exist, without obvious biographies, lacking useless and inefficient genealogies. That is to say Beckett’s and Joyce’s operas are complementary, their texts marking the transgression of literature in the first half of the XXth century, from the harshness of realism, existentialism or naturalism to contouring an original view of the post-modern world. The receiver is no longer an inert participant to the process of creation, he becomes active, he is required to react, to inform himself. A pertinent comment is made by Beckett himself, regarding this concern, in the essay about Joyce: “if you
don’t understand it, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you are too decadent to receive it. You are not satisfied unless form is so strictly divorced from content that you can comprehend the one almost without bothering to read the other. This rapid skimming and absorption of the scant cream of sense is made possible by what I may call a continuous process of copious intellectual salivation. The form that is an arbitrary and independent phenomenon can fulfil no higher function than that of stimulus for a tertiary or quartary conditioned reflex of dribbling comprehension.”

This rebellion spirit characterizes Beckett’s whole creation. If in Ulysses, Joyce is preoccupied by time and space, depicting everything in minute detail as to create the verosimilitude of Dublin, Beckett opts for an apparent omission of the exact time in his plays and to a neutrality of space. The gestures of his wanderers, whether referring to Didi and Gogo or Molloy or Belaqua, shrewdly differ from day to day, night to night, and their spatial perception is somewhat defective. Plainness, apparently banality, everything seems to be governed by a greyscale passing of today, resembling yesterday, possibly tomorrow. Romul Munteanu stated the existence of a circular time, in the case of Waiting for Godot, underlining Beckett’s striking detachment from Aristotle’s time, mathematically traced between the limits of chronological moments; the second act replays, almost identically, the first act, time becomes: “a still present, a sum of now, capable of dilating itself, absorbing the past and also the future which is mistaken in most of his tragic farces with nothingness.”

What Beckett owes to Joyce is the minute attention for the objects which populate the barren universe of his characters. There never is a random object in his plays and, later, in his short plays, the butaphoric economy will serve an important part. These visual elements contour, after all, his characters, and the relationship of his heroes with their objects becomes a clue to the message contained. Of course, when it comes to the radio and television plays, Beckett filters into annihilation the presence of these acting “props”, his

6 Samuel Beckett – Dante...Bruno.Vico...Joyce, essay about Work In Progress.
request for a non-stanislavskian approach being a well-known fact. If in *Happy Days* there suddenly appeared an umbrella, a Brownie, a nail file, a small mirror, Winnie’s handbag, the character’s relationship with the objects standing for her “biography”, in *Play*, a television script from 1963, the characters M, W1, W1 sit on stools, their lines being triggered by focusing the light on each character. The light stands for props, the stools necessary for the performance being unimportant, as they provide support for the stillness of the actors, who must concentrate on the neutrality of their speech. Also relevant, *Not I* is a short theatre text which presents a mouth reciting an apparently incoherent soliloquy, being seconded by a hooded shadow in dark clothes. One may observe a transition in Beckett’s approach to objects, especially when analyzing his plays and scripts. He filters into nothingness not only the word, but also the speaker, giving a thorough insight on his original view of the world.

Coming back to Marrinan’s assertions about the late creations of these two Irishmen, we remember: “As in *Finnegan’s Wake*, it is impossible to fully understand *Worstward Ho* as a whole, because, as a whole, it doesn’t have a beginning or an ending. It is a process and by trying to explain it, we distort the process of reception.” So one can assume that, although different from a stylistic point of view, these texts transmit, in a way, the same message to the receiver. If in *Finnegan’s Wake* Joyce distorts the Irish funeral traditions, the story becoming difficult to untangle, unless the reader studies Irish folklore, Beckett’s text seems a lacunar experience without characters, action or purpose. Starting with the almost untranslatable “on”, *Worstward Ho* has dynamited critical perception since its first edition in 1983: “Whether the title of this most recent novel, or novella, can be elicited from the earlier writings must be left to the specialist to find out. What cannot be denied is that Beckett has lighted upon a spectacular banner headline, which summons up other associations and, in doing so, achieves a querulous irony. *Worstward Ho* – the title puts us in mind of Charles Kingsley’s stirring adventure yarn, and perhaps of Kipling’s boarding-school, model for *Stalky and Co*. Shorn of the

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8 Ryan Marrinan – *Beginagain’s Wake! Joyce and Beckett at the Limits of Late Style*, Princeton University, New Jersey, 2007, p. 112.
exclamation-mark which gives a stirring emphasis to the Victorian adventure story (and the name of the Victorian school), *Worstward Ho* is the signal for an implosion of fictional matter."

This late text of Beckett changes the reader’s relation with the creation, but also the author’s ratio to his own product. Annihilating the character, the action and the artistic demarche creates almost philosophical assertions, on given themes. The meaning, as Marrinan also suggests, is difficult to encounter, if linking it to a certain theme, main theme etc., because *Worstward Ho* is and isn’t, at the same time, an invitation to dialogue. The conclusions arise before imaginative proposals of concepts such as a body, a mind or a thought, which might be the premises of a potential story. Even in the first part of the text there is a lure for the reader: “Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all.”

The whole text unravels definitions and assumptions of concepts and afterwards, it denies them or annihilates them by a pseudo-logic procedure of a voided rationality, exactly by exploiting the meaning until it is finally meaningless. The text ends (or, according to Marinnan’s analysis, it doesn’t end) with “Enough: suddenly it’s enough. Suddenly they are all far away: no movement and suddenly they are all far away, all least: three pins seen through one pinhole, in the dimmest dim. Vasts separate them. They are at the bounds of the boundless void, from where they will go no farther (for best or worse no farther). Nohow will they be less. Nohow worse. Nohow naught. Nohow on. Said nohow on.

I have said ‘nohow’ on.”

There is a certain similarity with another Beckettian text, *The Unnamable*, where the final phrase contains the same idealized urge of a character who finds himself at the end of his road: “I’ll go on. You must say the words, as long as there are any – until they find me, until they say me. (Strange pain, strange sin!) You must go on. Perhaps it’s done already. Perhaps

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11 Idem, p.47.
they have said me already. Perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens my story. (That would surprise me, if it opens.)

It will be I? It will be the silence, where I am? I don’t know. I’ll never know: in the silence you don’t know.

You must go on.

I can’t go on.

I’ll go on.”

There is an almost obsessive recurrence of this procedure of annihilating rationality through over-detailing the concept which, similar to a word repeated until exhaustion, loses its meaning. It becomes a form without essence, a useless carcase incapable of containing anything but a mere collection of sounds. In a similar way, we are disconcerted by Joyce’s creation, who, in *Finnegan’s Wake*, sums up allusions and word play which, apart from the erudite specialist in his opera, is inaccessible to the reader. Translating this text is a failure from the beginning, because Joyce’s language is, for the most part, an invention. Naturally, the effect is paradoxical: “Even though we cannot fully understand *Finnegan’s Wake* and *Worstward Ho*, we can understand that we, as beings defined by language, are telescoped.”

Marinnan’s idea is simple, yet ingenious; Beckett and Joyce succeed, through antagonistic means, to dismantle the language, one by over-crowding the meaning and by enriching it with intelligent polyphonies, the other by creating a void of the meaning. This new perspective on language is defining for the XXth century, because, as the critic states, we are beings of the word and by demolishing it, the effect surprises a demolished relationship of the human spirit with the universe, a continuous rebellion which questions the role of the individual, arts’ capacity of meaning something, beyond mimetic reflection and limited comprehension of the world.

The congruence and the dichotomy of these two authors may trigger an intriguing theoretical study. However, what interests us is that after

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13 Ryan Marrinan – *Beginagain Wake! Joyce and Beckett at the Limits of Late Style*, Princeton University, New Jersey, 2007, p. 120.
comparing and contrasting their texts, we found that the effect of their literature on the reader/receiver is strikingly the same. Paradoxically, the Beckettian encounter of a text without style, independent from its creator and existing by itself, requires a thorough understanding and study of Beckett’s whole opera and of his mentors, in order to reveal the hidden meaning of his creations.

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