Is Beckett a modernist or is he a postmodernist? Probably, even before the appearance of this second term, Beckett had already chosen for himself (if we can think in terms of choice, concerning this question) when, in 1937, in his "German Letter", he decided: "Let us therefore act as the mad mathematician who used a different principle of measurement at each step of his calculation."1

But why is it suddenly so important to define Beckett in terms of Modernism or Postmodernism? Perhaps one of the reasons is that modernism has traditionally involved all the great and original writers who have transgressed the canon of their times, and because postmodernism has most often been described with regard to non-artistic and non-literary values. Professor Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has stated, in agreement with what many scholars have said, that postmodernism is the first non-specifically artistic movement in the history of culture, and thus, it cannot be defined in terms of art or writing. But, in accordance with what John Barth has written about postmodern literature, I think we could risk saying it is a biased means of considering the problem, emphasizing postmodernism's massified aspects and forgetting that what it is supporting, by means of an ample gamut of mass diffusion, has nevertheless a more elitist origin and lies at the basis of most avantgarde and revolutionary trends in modern art. The fact that some meaningful insight about human nature has suddenly become 'popular,' does not give the lie to the basic truth it involves, no matter the extent of its vulgarisation or deformation. Some would believe it is just the opposite.

Perhaps many of the objections to postmodernism are based on the so-called nihilistic, reference-less world picture it offers, its claim to a system relativized and constantly questioned, which is, in fact, one of the first symptoms of the decadence of systems in general. In this sense, the refusal of many distinguished theoreticians to include postmodernism among the literary-oriented movements is their refusal to admit that literature, and literature of the best kind, can reflect a very disturbing picture of 'la condition humaine,' without volunteering any kind of solution.

Basically, it is a refusal to accept any other version of our world but the one afforded by the binary constitution of our perceptions. Theoretical physicists have shown a much ampler view of this.2 Their non-binary conception of reality is very closely linked to what, in the
realm of writing, David Lodge has studied as "alternative modes of composition," characteristic of postmodernism, and whose transcendence of the metaphorical and metonymical devices as essential to the dichotomic mode of knowing shows very clearly that literature has, since its origins, probed this fascinating possibility of reality which has become ever more apparent during the present century, and long before a term such as postmodern was coined to try to register a very complex and even contradictory combination of phenomena.

A brief enumeration will sum up our present tendency to move away from dichotomic modes of perception, and the continuous reference to Beckett's writing will show the capital importance of literature in shaping the features of postmodernism, long before theoreticians, both extra-literary and literary, had even dreamt of all this going on.

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In the first place, something has happened to our notion of time. The absence of a sense of the historical — meaning well defined instances of past, present and future — lead to a picture of our world as post, which amounts to the feeling that everything has already taken place. It is John Barth's "literature (and life) of exhaustion." Together with this feeling of *dejà accompli* we experience the present as something completely volatile and unverifiable, swallowed by past and future, overlapping to the point of simultaneity. We could use the words of the *L'Innomable* to clarify this: "J'ai deux faces et pas d'épaisseur."3 The idea of progress is of little use here. We might think of what Gumbrecht calls the Heathrow effect, the place of flight connections where the convergence of suspended regional times obliterates the experience of time. Discontinuity and randomness, in Lodge's terminology, are the modes of composition that may record this process of *de-temporalization*. We can see this process of doing without time in Beckett's more recent shorter prose. The voices in them could belong to any time, even to the time before the beginning of time. Or to the time after the end of time. In this sense, the Addenda to *Watt*, with that forgotten phrase borrowed from C.G. Jung, "never properly born,"4 is an interesting antecedent of de-temporalization.

This expansive and simultaneously retractile quality of time affects, according to Beckett, the subject/object relationship. We read in his *Proust*: "The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for to-day's."5 Thus, the idea of attainment vanishes in the air. This is one of his first allusions to failure as a constant in the human equation. Moreover, "the observer infects the observed with his own
mobility." “The object evolves, and by the time the conclusion — if any — is reached, it is already out of date.” Actually, beginnings and endings are questionable: “écarter toute idée de commencement et de fin” we read in L’Innommable. The only marks of the passing of time are the marks of decadence: “One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?,” exclaims Pozzo, while confronted with the question when? Even the notion of the worst loses consistency, and with it the idea of comparison and value: “C’est le commencement qui est le pire, puis le milieu, puis la fin, à la fin c’est la fin qui est le pire.” The worst is what one is experiencing. So, paradoxically, what one is experiencing is never the worst, as Edgar in King Lear knew too well. Actually, as with all the rest, the worst does not exist. The nearest approachable is a worstward movement, a kind of worstwardness.

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If, because of this proteic nature of time, “the individual is a succession of individuals,” the idea of the absolute is destroyed at the very core of the place where it could in the last instance be present: “the only world that has reality and significance, the world of our latent consciousness.” Man lives, whether he knows it or not, in the midst of a constant relativization of himself, his environment and his beliefs. This is a process of de-totalization which we can appreciate at different levels of life: from the waning of ideologies at one end of human activity, through the crisis of identity (present already in Waiting for Godot, way up to Not I) and which Beckett sums up marvellously in those words to Charles Juliet: “A la fin, on ne sait pas qui parle.” Or, otherwise: “Mais comment dire célé (…) Il n’y a pas de pronom (…) le je, le il, le nous, rien ne convient.” Or still, with a more general intention: “Il faut se tenir là où il n’y a ni pronom, ni solution, ni réaction, ni prise de position possibles (…)”. And finally this de-totalization leads to the impossibility of stating values. In the same Rencontre with Juliet, Beckett points out the uselessness of uttering judgements of value:

Mais les valeurs morales ne sont pas accessibles. Et on ne peut pas les définir… Pour les définir il faudrait prononcer un jugement de valeur, ce qui ne se peut. C’est pourquoi je n’ai jamais été d’accord avec cette notion de théâtre de l’absurde. Car là, il y a jugement de valeur.
On ne peut même pas parler du vrai. C’est ce qui fait partie de la détresse. Paradoxalement, c’est par la forme, que l’artiste peut trouver une sorte d’issue. En donnant forme à l’informe. Ce n’est peut-être qu’à ce niveau qu’il y aurait une affirmation sous-jacente.16

Outside the very small possibility of the artist to state, through the device of form, every other alternative is out of the question. Beckett comes very near the nihilistic Buddhism of Nagarjuna, when he says: “La négation n’est pas possible. Pas plus que l’affirmation. Il est absurde de dire que c’est absurde.”17

The questioning of the notion of totality, of system, even in science, shows the world as multiple, provisional, aleatory. Much as in Watt, in “All that Fall” or in “The Expelled”, the stairs “were never the same and even the number of steps seemed to vary (…)”.18 Because, in spite of Watt’s need of a system, reality kept on appearing to him in the same elusive way as a TV program does to a zapping addict. Concurrently for Watt, a hypothesis “evolved,” “lost its virtue after one or two applications, and had to be replaced by another.”19 This process of deconstruction of a coherent world picture is described by Lodge’s modes of alternative composition known as contradiction and permutation.

Beckett’s work is full of examples of this, as Lodge himself has pointed out: the closing words and action in Godot, Vladimir’s frustrated concern for unanimous truth in the Gospels, in the episode of the two thieves, Clov’s contradictory remarks. Watt and Molloy are almost redundant examples of permutation: the sucking stones, Mr. Knott’s possibilities of nourishment, the dog alternatives, etc. But rather than accumulating many instances of the same, it would be interesting to emphasize the effects that this fragmented imago mundi, lacking in fixed reference points, operates upon the concept of literature itself, as developed by Beckett with great lucidity.

For example, this difficulty to think in terms of absolute notions, Beckett has clearly pointed it out in his text “Henri Hayden. Homme-peintre”: “De ce peut d’où l’on se précipite, comme de la pire des malédictions, vers les prestiges du tout ou du rien.”20 Man looks for the alls and nothings to achieve safety, but the point, for Beckett, is to yield to the temptation of the small, the little, the temptation of the relative. The text in which E. M. Cioran evokes the difficulties of finding a French title for Lessness comes to mind, though I don’t agree with him that Lessness is “l’absence à l’état pur,”21 but something hybrid and much more postmodern, like that other example of a comparative turned into an abstract noun: worstwardness. Because a
comparative or a superlative (i.e., relative degrees) are suddenly thrust into the fixity of the abstract, achieving (in the beautiful words by Cioran) a "mélange de privation et infini."  

That of Beckett's is a world seen through minor or marginal events, relative to each other. Not absolutes. Watt disliked absolutes, such as day and night, earth and sky. This is also reflected in Beckett's dramatic devices, which refer more to the part than to the whole, but avoid the metonymical relationship, the relationship of contiguity, because the fragments in Beckett stand for themselves, and not as symbols or metaphors. "Watt had not seen a symbol, nor executed an interpretation, since the age of fourteen or fifteen."  

Let us consider Catastrophe or Not I. The mouth in Not I, this débris of a life that was never lived, is dramatically striking, precisely because it lives on, without a body, even without the memory of a body. The catastrophe in Catastrophe has lost its sense of belonging to a play or other. It becomes a catastrophe *per se*, the catastrophe *par excellence*, applicable to all stories and to none. This progressive itinerary of reduction and concentration, rather than an "apotheosis of the word," leads to the "literature of the unword." What kind of universe must appeal to the unword in order to express itself, if it is not a universe which cannot afford a word to define, to hierarchize and systematize it? A world as that evoked by the Argentine poet Roberto Juarroz:

El mundo es el segundo término  
de una metáfora incompleta,  
una comparación  
cuyo primer elemento se ha perdido.

¿Dónde está lo que era como el mundo?  
¿Se fugó de la frase  
o lo borramos?

¿O acaso la metáfora  
estuvo siempre truncada?

(The world is the second term / of an incomplete metaphor,/ a simile / whose first element is lost. // Where is to be found that which was like the world? / Did it fly from the phrase? / Or did we erase it? // Or maybe the metaphor / has always been truncated?).  

Alien to a systematized structure in which things appear 'similar to' our world cannot be compared, our feelings cannot be compared, because the other term of the metaphor is lost, and because a *tertium comparationis* that fixes the term for comparison is also missing.  

25
This is what leads us to the third outstanding feature of postmodernism that has been one of Beckett's main preoccupations throughout his work: the possibility of meaning. Are we beginning to mean something? asks Clolv, alarmed. "Pas de gag, pas d'explication" screams the Director of Catastrophe. When David Lodge, in Small World, used Professor Zapp to state that "every decoding is another encoding," when Stoppard's characters in Hapgood or The Dog It Was That Died compared our comprehension of life to the plight of a double agent who, through telling the truth and lying in both senses, has forgotten, or is unable to tell whom he is spying for, they are just echoing, in postmodern tones, what Beckett thought of meaning and the possibility of hermeneutics, while commenting upon the painting of the Van Velde: "Un dévoilement sans fin, voile derrière voile, plan sur plan de transparences, imparfaites, un dévoilement vers l'indévoilable, le rien, la chose à nouveau." It is worth remarking that this "le rien, la chose à nouveau" is as if Beckett had been afraid of being too absolute with le rien, and had tried to relativize it into la chose à nouveau. As if endless repetition were the nearest to nothingness we were allowed.

The question of Beckett's complex relationship to postmodernism is also the question of Beckett's complex relationship to literature in general, because postmodernism is indissolubly linked to literature. From the beginning man's writing has struggled to record his helplessness with regard to the relativity of space, time, values, knowledge, meaning. In its attempts, through the ages, to do so, literature has in many cases given way to the temptation to fill in the appalling gap of this void, with the luring appeals of environment — what Cioran calls "la tentation d'exister" or "la chute dans l'être." It is this falling into being that has camouflaged literature in a variety of "realistic doctrines" or in what Beckett himself refers to as a literature of "the apotheosis of the word." But it is precisely the opposite since Beckett's own "literature of the unword" has regained for literature its true essentials: the questioning of the self, and of all other certainties which support our deceiving life and writing. It is by assuming uncertainty, as Montaigne did, as a "mol oreiller," that Beckett has re-instated literature in its real and precarious field. Life has been, in spite of centuries of efforts to give of it "a reassuring and gratifying image," a text that is constantly written and read, re-written and re-read, as in Ohio Impromptu, and so, subject to the same "empêchements" and failure Beckett admires in his favourite painters.
To the extent that the postmodern world may be described by the phenomena of de-temporalization, de-totalization, and de-signification, all these features are represented in writing by discontinuity, fragmentation, randomness, contradiction, permutation, excess, and short circuit, all of which were present in Beckett’s work before the term ‘postmodern’ was ever heard. Literature, in this light, may perhaps have ceased to be a ‘totalizing device’ to describe society, as claimed by Gumbrecht, though it maintains its efficiency as a de-totalizing device for the same, adjusting itself more coherently to the world to which it belongs. Beckett has foreseen all this when he makes his characters refer to events in life as “some story heard long before, an instant in the life of another, ill-told, ill-heard, and more than half forgotten.”29 This was so for Watt already; this is what Ohio Impromptu will be about; this is the key to Mal vu, mal dit and his last texts. In a sense, then, not only could we say that Beckett’s writing possesses most of the main features of the ‘regard postmoderne’ but that it is precisely his writing that has helped, through the clever reading of it by writers like Blanchot or Barthes, to (re)discover how near literature has always been to postmodern aesthetics.

And, if the world is unreadable and its sense unattainable, human effort to create is doomed to failure. Most of Beckett’s work deals with this impossibility, though it is nevertheless framed by a compulsion to say, and to look for meanings. “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”30 It is mainly this æsthetics of failure that links him to postmodernism, and also surpasses it, paradoxically. Because “empêchement” in Beckett goes ontologically further than exhaustion in Barth or the sense of an end of avant-gardes, as shown by Umberto Eco or Octavio Paz. In Beckett’s work, postmodernism transcends itself, acquiring a more atemporal significance, by acknowledging that there has never been a time when expression and interpretation were possible, that, in a sense, all periods have always been ‘post,’ and that man cannot decipher what lay before post.

Laura Cerrato

NOTES


17. Ibidem p. 49.


28


