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## PLAYS AS LINGUISTIC GAMES: A LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF BECKETT'S POSTWAR THEATRE

### ABSTRACT

In this article, I propose a 'literal' interpretation of Beckett's postwar theatre, which allows to give importance to an 'aesthetic of sound' in which a work of art finds its own sense in the fact that it is a linguistic game created by an author. After 1945, the author becomes unable to speak about the profound themes of the Western tradition, but can write plays in which there is the configuration of an aesthetic of the small talk, to be analyzed according to a hermeneutics of superficiality.

KEYWORDS: Beckett, theatre, interpretation, superficiality, contemporary literature

The problem of the interpretation of some of Beckett's texts is apparently an irresolvable one. In fact, much of Beckett's oeuvre seems to be resistant to any kind of interpretation, because what is written seems nonsensical or, at least, not implying profound meanings. In this essay, I propose that it is possible a literal interpretation of Beckett's work. This means that I consider that the author's declarations about his own work can be taken in their literal sense, such as the famous "it means what it says", referred to the meaning of *Waiting for Godot* (Croall 2005: 91). The main and obvious objection to my hypothesis is that, taken in their literal sense, Beckett's texts do not seem to convey any meaning and to be nonsensical. Considering a literal interpretation as valid could seem as a dismissal of any attempt at interpreting. However, I will try to demonstrate that a literal interpretation of Beckett's texts is possible considering that their sense lies in the creation of self-sufficient linguistic games. This thesis is also coherent with the same author's refusal of any interpretation of his own work, and with his cult for aesthetics; for example, in a letter to the American director Alan Schneider, talking about a possible interpretation of *Endgame*, Beckett wrote: "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke



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intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else". (Reid 1968: 33).

The problem that emerges from these considerations is a traditional one: how to give a meaning to a poetic word that apparently does not convey any meaning? How to give a meaning to a work of art that apparently speaks about nothing? This problem is a classic hermeneutical problem which has notoriously interested many literary critics and philosophers, such as Martin Esslin (Esslin 1961) and Theodor W. Adorno (Adorno 1982). I will propose that in order to understand the sense of Beckett's theatre it is not sufficient to consider his oeuvre as coherent with the etiquette of 'Absurd', or to suppose that positive values emerge from his work (I refer, for example to the hypothesis proposed by Adorno). On the contrary, a literal interpretation of Beckett's work, while it may seem paradoxical, has the advantage of not seeing meanings in Beckett's oeuvre where they are absent (and the meanings emerging from his work are potentially infinite and differ from each other if one refers to one critical school or to another, especially after postmodernism). In addition, it may be the starting point for what I proposed to consider as a 'hermeneutics of superficiality' (Sanges 2023).<sup>1</sup> I will discuss my hypothesis by considering Beckett's theatrical production after the Second World War. I assume that, after 1945 (taken necessarily as a conventional date), there was a substantial revolution of ethical values that may be reflected also in aesthetics, justifying the possibility of a hermeneutics of superficiality, which considers that many themes of the Western philosophical tradition destiny, suffering – are considered by that time as unresolvable: they are 'lost themes'; namely, by that time, the writer has not the possibility to be the interpreter of those important philosophical themes that were paramount for the core of Western tradition: the writer can only continue to express, writing banalities. I utilize this hermeneutical approach for Beckett's oeuvre by focusing on his theatre. Thus, I consider the very limits of the interpretations of his texts; the conventions of the theatrical genre; the futility of the conversations between the characters in the plays.

The problem is to understand how it is possible that Beckett wrote something that apparently does not convey any meaning, without trying to see meanings when these meanings are absent. In other words, my interpretation is an attempt at an apparently paradoxical non-interpretation, which tries to 'logically see' what is

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<sup>1</sup> By writing 'hermeneutics of superficiality', I intend to propose to approach Beckett's oeuvre from a fresh perspective, giving importance to the cultural changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a post-nihilistic period, and after the two World Wars, a hermeneutics of superficiality would be an alternative to hermeneutical methodologies which approach specific literary texts by looking for profound meanings in them. Many writers may be unable (or not interested) to deal with the philosophical themes of the Western tradition – talking about philosophers, Beckett wrote: "I never understand anything they write" (Graver, Federman 1979: 217). This attitude is similar, to some extent, to Wittgenstein's consideration about culture and aesthetics, gathered in his posthumous book "Culture and Value", such as the ones in which the philosopher states that some philosophical themes of the Western tradition, approached by Beethoven, are out of his world (Wittgenstein 1988).

presented on scene and what is written, before trying to superimpose meanings. An excellent starting point for this kind of interpretation is to reason about the choice of the theatrical genre. This standpoint of 'seeing' before 'interpreting' Beckett's literature also implies that I propose to think Beckett's impossibility to communicate (or to communicate anything important) not only from a cultural point of view, but from a 'technical' point of view, as after 1945 it is technically impossible to provide any new meaning in literature: the author can only say banalities and repeat himself (and, in the case of Beckett, self-translate himself); on the other hand, his characters can only do some small talk. This also means that I do not consider the very famous Adorno's dictum about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz: in this essay, I do not consider the cultural context for which to write poetry after WWII may be barbaric because it would perpetrate a destructive culture.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I focus in saying that after 1945 there has been a *tabula rasa* in Western culture, for which it was impossible to say anything new.

The Beckettian plays, at a first level, are self-sufficient aesthetic-linguistic games doomed to not produce any meaning outside of the level of the phonic significance of what they say. Beckett's texts are open to innumerable interpretations: it is obvious that the interpretations given to Beckett's texts radically differ from each other (how to decide if an interpretation based on Deconstruction is more valuable than one based on the *New Criticism*?). Interpreting a Beckettian text risks to be a paradoxical way to confirm the very interpretative methodology applied by a critical school. My interpretative move is then the one of logically 'seeing' what is written in the text and 'shown' on the scene, before interpreting.

This option of 'seeing' Beckett's theatre before interpreting it is not exactly the one of refusing any interpretation of the author's plays, which was the position held by some critics (for example Bernard Dort) after the first appearance of *Waiting for Godot* as it is possible to verify by reading the articles about *Waiting for Godot* written in newspapers and in the magazines (Derval 2007). Instead, I consider that Beckettian theatre is a formal option that does not invite the critic to abandon any attempt at interpretation. On the contrary, it invites the critics to consider their scarcity of interpretative means when they approach some texts which apparently do not convey any meaning. It is possible to have a non-ideological viewpoint, almost a 'non-viewpoint' – different from Adorno's – assuming that in 1945 there was an exhaustion of all the possibilities to solve the profound themes (suffering, destiny, death, and the like) of Western tradition with the means of language. Language becomes the means to talk about futile things and the writer can

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<sup>2</sup> Here, for the scope of this essay, I simplify the problem of the culture after 1945 and the question of the continuation of Western culture after the war. Instead, I focus on a fresh perspective about the banality of literature after 1945 based on the 'obvious' evidence of its impossibility to say anything new. It is worth quoting here extensively what Adorno wrote about the impossibility of poetry after 1945: "The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today" (Adorno 1967: 34).

create superficial aesthetic games but he is doomed to fail to understand anything important.

If we consider that after 1945, there was a *tabula rasa* of ethical and aesthetic values, the very force of Beckett's theatre may come from his awareness of the fact that contemporary art should strive towards "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express", as he said already in 1949 during his dialogue with George Duthuit (Cohn 1983: 139). It is important to think about Beckett's choice of writing plays, in which (because of the characteristics of the literary genre) there is the necessity of an action but in which nothing happens; and about the fact that the characters apparently speak about nothing. I propose to solve these aporias by suggesting that Beckett's plays are to be taken literally as aesthetic-linguistic games that mean nothing but what they say.

In the case of Beckett's theatre, it is obviously difficult to make a plot analysis of his works, as they challenge the famous Aristotelian unities (Aristotle 2013) – as obviously much of contemporary theatre and generically much English theatre. However, the radicality of Beckett's theatre lies in the fact that it seems to challenge not only the unity of action described by Aristotle, but also the very concept of the existence of a plot and even the very concept of the existence of an action. This last statement is not without problems because, according to dramatic theory, in theatre, action is necessary. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine a theatrical play in which action is totally absent. In the process of writing a play, it is obviously necessary that the author considers the element of action, which makes that text different from a text belonging to a different literary genre, for example poetry. Drawing from Aristotle's evolutive idea of literature, according to which poetic art started as a narration and then the *èpos* became *drama*, Giulio Guidorizzi writes: "epic is a narration (*èpos*, "word"), drama is an action (*drama*, "drama", from *drao*, "to act")" (Guidorizzi 2003).<sup>3</sup> Classical philologists do not totally agree about how Western theatre was born, but the very etymology of drama is connected with the action. Here, leaving aside the theoretical question and the philological studies about the characteristics of Western theatre, in the case of Beckett, there is an unsolved question concerning the choice of writing a play to represent something in which apparently nothing happens. Before discussing the problem of how is it possible – if it is possible – to write something that does not communicate anything, there is the paradox of an author who writes plays where nothing happens, going against the very nature of the dramatic genre. It is possible to solve this paradox if we contextualize Beckett's literature in the time in which the author lived, and if we think that his plays (written after the WWII) configure an aesthetic game in which the element of action is annihilated thanks to a work on language: language becomes action in the context of this aesthetic game in which Beckett knows that it is impossible to express and communicate anything new, but it is necessary to continue to produce literature,

<sup>3</sup> If not indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

and he can do so thanks to the creation of a game in the form of a play (and, eventually, thanks to the process of self-translation of his very works, which becomes an act of self-interpretation and the method to continue to produce literature).

I write here the first lines of *Waiting for Godot*, where it is already possible to understand the dialectic between action and non-action in Beckett's theatre: the author creates the paradoxical situation of a theatre in which the action is only apparent:

*ESTRAGON, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again. As before.*

*Enter VLADIMIR.*

*ESTRAGON: [Giving up again.] Nothing to be done.*

(Beckett 1986: 11)

In the stage directions, Beckett writes what Estragon is doing: he is seated, but he is also performing an action. He is trying to take off his shoe, then he stops, and then he starts again. This action is apparently not important, and the reader or spectator of the play does not immediately grasp the sense of this description or action. Yet, the author indulges in describing this action very well, which does not convey any meaning. Here is described an action that does not convey any important meaning and does not bring any important information for with the development of the plot of the play. Thus, it seems that in Beckett there is no narration, no *épos* that becomes *drama*, but a mix of *épos* and *drama*, where there is the narration of an action which goes back to the narration itself in a futile game. The inconsistency between the convention of the theatrical literary genre that prescribes that action is necessary and the fact that the described actions have apparently no function, suggests that the Beckettian text is involved in a stylistic game that creates its own rules. The description of Estragon trying to take off his shoe can be analysed as an action that has its own performativity only in the context of the coordinates of a specific linguistic game.

The adjective 'exhausted', referred to Estragon right in the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*, is the most important word in Gilles Deleuze's essay on Beckett, *L'épuisé*, in which the philosopher points out that in Beckett all possibilities are exhausted (Deleuze 1992). Deleuze's interpretation is obviously a philosophical interpretation, to be understood taking into account the philosophical environment of France after World War II. Specifically, while in Heidegger's understanding human beings are thrown into the world and still open to possibilities, in Deleuze's understanding, human beings have already exhausted all possibilities and some activities, such as studying, are already exhausted possibilities: the position of the exhausted human being is that of a seated man, like Beckett's Estragon.

However, Deleuze's philosophical interpretation can be considered also from a further standpoint, in the analysis of Beckett's plays. In fact, while from a philosophical (or metaphysical) point of view, humans have exhausted all possibilities –

and this can be easily related to existentialistic theatre or to Esslin's interpretation of Beckett's Absurd theatre – in Beckett seems to exist an 'exhaustion of the possibilities of language'. Starting from the very beginning of his most iconic play, it is possible to notice the configuration of a sort of aesthetic game in which what is written does not convey any meaning: in the play, nothing really happens. However, since it is a play, the theatrical conventions need to be respected and so there's the need for an action, which, however, is de-activated in the same moment in which it is described. The description of the action is an obligation to respect the rules of the theatrical genre, but it does not really convey any meaning, as all the play does not necessarily convey any meaning but it is just a succession of sounds which are necessary in order to create a work of literature. In other words, after the World War II, with the collapse of the ethical and aesthetic values, there is not really anything important left to talk about and the author can only speak about futile things because, being an author, he is obliged to express. From these considerations, it does not stem out that Beckett's texts do not have any meaning or, simplistically, that the sense of Beckett's texts is in their nonsense. On the contrary, I suggest that Beckett's texts can be intended in a literal way: namely, Beckett did not really require an interpretation to the public, the reader or the critic. I mean to take Beckett's declaration about his own work in a literal sense; so, his work would be literally just a matter of sound, as he wrote to Alan Schneider (Reid 1968: 33).

Moreover, this interpretation, or 'non-interpretation', which assumes that any interpretation of Beckett's texts may bring to a cul-de-sac because it may be out of the scope of what the author meant to say, does not give more importance to the text than to the context of an oeuvre; instead, I propose to logically 'see' what the author shows in his texts without interpreting it. In fact, taking literally what Beckett said in his texts, the literary critic gives importance to the aesthetic of sound, which was paramount for Beckett. In this way, Beckett's texts would find their sense in the creation of an aesthetic game that find its own justification not based on a philosophical interpretation, but in their own aesthetics created by the author. This obviously means that these aesthetic 'games' cannot have the ambition to solve the profound problems of Western philosophy and literature, because in Beckett's plays nothing happens and the characters talk about futile things. As I will show below, when they talk about more important things, the conversation is promptly banalized and brought to a level of small talk. Therefore, Beckett's plays seem to belong to an aesthetic of superficiality, different from the aesthetic that was typical of the great Western literature until World War II. Furthermore, saying that it is impossible to reach a solid and unique interpretation of Beckett's work is not simply considering the history of literary criticism after postmodernism. On the contrary, the author still exists and he is the depositary of the meaning of his oeuvre, despite the fact that modern works of art may be 'open works of art', as theorised by Umberto Eco (Eco 1993). Beckett would instead configure an aesthetic game in which the work of art finds its own justification in the rules of that very aesthetic game: against the hypothesis that Beckett's works of art require the cooperation of the critic, the public

or the reader to be interpreted, they seem to be resistant to any kind of interpretation, to be hermetically closed to any tentative of hermeneutics.

In the afterwar, after the exhaustion of the possibilities to act for humans, there is an exhaustion of language. In the very specific case of Beckett's theatre, there is a language that describes actions that are deactivated and do not lead to a dramatic progression. Furthermore, what is written with language does not communicate anything important, because the characters just do some small talk. Finally, there is not an advancement of the plot, because whatever is written, nothing happens anyway: this is the Beckettian linguistic game, and the sense of Beckettian dramatic literature needs to be found in his work on language.

Returning to the text of *Waiting for Godot*, after the stage directions, Estragon says: "Nothing to be done", and to make the point clear, Beckett writes in the stage direction "Giving up again". Thus, *Waiting for Godot* starts with a character who makes a trivial action (trying to take off his shoe), but he gets exhausted, and does not accomplish his action. Before analyzing the significance of this failed action and to relate this to Beckett's poetics, what is shown in the text and on stage is this: a man tries to take off his shoe, he cannot do that, he gives up. Considering that *Waiting for Godot* is a play and that in a play there is the necessity of action, it is possible to say that Beckett respected the rules of the theatrical genre: the fact that the action failed does not mean that it did not happen. Even though the public or the reader of the critic do not understand the description of this trivial action, there is not a poetic deficiency. On the contrary, the rules followed by Beckett in writing his play are different from those expected by the public. The stage directions are an invitation to look at what is shown on stage.

Already in the stage direction, we can notice the rules of Beckett's aesthetic game, which is a game doomed to fail: in the cultural ruin of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what the author can do is to continue to express something, even though there is no need to do that. When there is nothing left to talk about, the uncertainty of the contemporary human being reaches a level in which there is literally nothing to talk about: what is left is just the level of language, which can be totally detached from content. So, denying any allegorical interpretation of Beckett's text is to say that Beckett's operation was one of considering as obvious the confusion of values which happened in the Second World War, and to think that the only thing to do (maybe not valuable, but necessary for the continuation of literature) was to work on language, considering the content as something which is detached from form and taken for granted. From this derives the fact that Beckett's characters can just express themselves via small talk. Content is trivial. The only thing which can be worth to do is to work on language, even with the very peculiar activity of self-translation.

Returning to the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*, after Estragon gives up about trying to take off his shoe, Vladimir says:

VLADIMIR: [*Advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*]. I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable,

you haven't tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. [*He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to ESTRAGON.*] So there you are again.

(Beckett 1986: 11)

Vladimir answers to Estragon talking like he is talking about something extremely important, but Estragon is just talking about trying to take off a shoe. The aesthetic game composed by Beckett has its own rules. The stage directions describe actions that are necessary in theatre, as prescribed by the rules of the theatrical genre. The words spoken by the characters are actions in the sense that language is action, but these actions are useless according to common sense, still being useful in the aesthetic game. This is consistent with Beckett's cult for aesthetics: in Beckett's plays, the necessity for actions forces the author to make his characters to act, but all actions fail; this matches the fact that there is apparently no advancement of the plot at all and the fact that the characters apparently talk about nothing, or they just do some small talk. Therefore, the work on language becomes a work aimed at failure of language itself, in the context in which content becomes more and more detached from form.

At the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir says "And I resumed the struggle". What struggle is he talking about? Where does the conversation between Estragon and Vladimir lead? After that Estragon said "nothing to be done", Vladimir concludes his speech by saying "So there you are again", changing the topic of the conversation. In a normal conversation, shared rules are necessary; however, here it is difficult to follow the consequentiality of the conversation between the two characters. This is because the normal rules of conversation can be followed in a social game, but not in an aesthetic one created by the author Beckett, which does not communicate information but is, nonetheless, a work of art.

This kind of interpretation can also apply to the second Beckett's major play. Beckett wrote *Endgame* between 1955 and 1957; the *première*, in French, was on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1957 at the Royal Court Theatre in London. Interestingly, on that occasion, it was also premiered *Act Without Words I*: here, there is a man on stage who does several apparently useless actions, and he fails to accomplish them. Again, also in this *pièce*, the actions are not comprehensible by the public according to social schemes, as it happens in *Endgame*, where the dramatic action goes in the direction of "nullification, immobility, silence" (Bertinetti 2002: XV).

As at the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*, at the beginning of *Endgame*, Beckett describes very carefully what one of the characters, Clov, is doing, after the description of the scene.

*CLOV goes and stands under window left. Stiff, staggering walk. He looks up at window left. He turns and looks at window right. He goes and stands under window right. He looks up at window right. He turns and looks at window left. [...] He gets down, goes with ladder towards ashbins, halts, turns, carries back ladder and sets it down under window right, goes to ashbins, removes sheets covering them, folds it over his arms. [...] He goes to HAMM, removes sheet*



covering him, folds it over his arm. [...] CLOV looks him over. Brief laugh. He goes to door, halts, turns towards auditorium.

(Beckett 1986: 92–93)

As it happens with *Waiting for Godot*, also in *Endgame* there is a very detailed description of the inconsistent actions of a character at the beginning of the play. Giving credit to the viewpoint of 'viewing' what it is shown on the scene rather than interpreting it, this essay rejects the allegorical interpretations of Beckett's texts, as well as those interpretations which see in *Endgame* a specific situation depicted, for example the ones which assume that the play could be set in a post-nuclear environment (Garraad 2011).

While reading the stage directions of *Endgame*, we can interrogate ourselves about the significance of the actions made by Clov on stage, and we can also give ourselves elaborated answers, but the final and simple and trivial answer is: nothing happens. This statement is to be related to the dynamics *épos-drama*, described above, according to which action needs to be presented on the scene just because the literary dramatic genre needs to have the element of action. On the other hand, the construction of this very game is the responsibility of the sole author, which is to be considered as 'not dead' in the famous sense Roland Barthes gave to the death of the author in his essay (Barthes 1967). This is consistent with the fact that, in the present essay, I am proposing that no sense emerges from the first level of interpretation of Beckett's plays; this is also consistent with the almost obsessive control that Beckett wanted to have over the production of his plays, which is documented by his epistolary, as well as by many declarations such as the ones which can be found in his biographies, such as: "The best possible play is one in which there are no actors, only the text. I'm trying to find a way to write one" (Blair 1990: 544), which almost suggest that Beckett's plays configure a radical situation in which the only important element is the (authorial) text and everything else is only a secondary mean or support for the same text, which should be exactly adherent to the text by the author.

Cloves makes actions that do not make any sense and that remind the vagabond Murphy, the main character of the homonymous novel, to relate Beckett's plays to the author's artistic imaginary. Again, also here Beckett describes very well the actions made by the characters, which are incomprehensible if we think of the social norms, but which are consistent in a play created and controlled by the author. Before saying that these actions are absurd or that they refer to any specific situation, it is necessary to point out that Beckett-author managed to show his characters doing some actions. A necessary condition for the existence of a play is that there are actions; if these actions do not bring anywhere, they may still make sense in a linguistic game doomed to fail created and managed by Beckett. If what is written does not make any sense for the reader and for the public, does this mean that Beckett's text does not make any sense at all and that we need to abandon any attempt at interpretation? Before giving an affirmative answer to this question, it is useful to remember the positive reactions the prisoners at San Quentin had watching *Waiting for*

*Godot*, reported in the newspaper *San Quentin News*, discussed by Esslin in the introduction of his essay (Esslin 1991: 19–28). Can such a play be completely devoid of any sense? Instead, it is possible to say that in that historical period, Beckett could not discuss about profound themes, writing instead works of art that functioned with their own rules.

However, assuming a general difficulty to reach a unique and definitive interpretation of Beckett's texts, one may interrogate themselves about what about the dialectic sense/nonsense and *épos/drama*: what is the sense of the actions described by Beckett? We may think that the propositions Beckett is writing – and what is shown on scene – are nonsensical such as the radically nonsensical propositions (*unsinning*), such as “1 is a number”, discussed by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* or that they are simply nonsensical (*sinnlos*), such as the tautologies – see for example TLP 4.462 – also discussed in the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 2001). The actions made by Clov, for example, going towards window right do not bring to any comprehensible conclusion for the public according to a shared teleology. We can accept about it the sentence written by Beckett that there is a literal consistency of fact and words, confirming his famous sentence: “it means what it says” (Croall 2005: 91). In other words, there is an evident tautology according to which the sentence (for example): “turns head right, watch window right”, does mean “turns head right, watch window right”. There is no possibility to interpret this, but what Beckett wrote found a perfect coincidence in what is written. And there is no progression of the plot because nothing ever happens: technically, the *drama* has incorporated in itself the *épos*.

As with the description of the actions, the conversations between the characters in Beckett's plays seem to lead to nothing valuable: as the actions lead to nothing, it seems that Beckett's characters talk about nothing and that they configure an aesthetic of small talk, taken as the only thing to talk about after the crisis of 1945. I write here the first conversation between Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*:

CLOV [*fixed gaze, tonelessly*] Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. [*Pause.*] grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, little heap, the impossible heap. [...]

HAMM: Me – [*he yawns*] – to play. [...] my father? [*Pause.*] My mother? [*Pause.*] My... dog? [*Pause.*] Oh I am willing to believe they suffer as much as such creatures can suffer. But does that mean their sufferings equal mine? No doubt. [...] Get me ready, I'm going to bed.

CLOV: I've just got you up.

HAMM: And what of it?

CLOV: I can't be getting you up and putting you to bed evert five minutes, I have things to do.

(Beckett 1986: 93–94)

First, Clov says: “Finished, it's finished”. Then, as to correct himself, he says: “It's nearly finished, it must be nearly finished”. At the very beginning of the play, one of the main characters communicates that is already finished, or “nearly

finished". He communicates this to the public, to the reader of the text, to himself, to the other character on stage, Hamm. However, this communication is hardly a communication of information, because it communicates something which is hard if not impossible to understand and which does not help the conversation to proceed and does not convey any profound meaning: the written and spoken word deactivate its potential ability to communicate something in the same moment in which is written; when it does not convey any meaning anymore, it becomes just a succession of sound useful to "continue to express" in an exhausting linguistic game. It is difficult to find the exact content of Clov's speech. However, Hamm answers Clov speaking about something; furthermore, he seems to speak about something very important and talk about a theme of paramount importance for Western literature: suffering. In a speech full of hesitation and pauses, Hamm speaks about great suffering, which at first seems to be a physical pain, then it seems to be a psychological one, and finally to reach almost metaphysical dimensions ("Oh I am willing to believe they suffer as much as such creatures can suffer. But that mean that sufferings equal mine?") He is talking about extremely and irresolvable themes: can the sufferings of his mother or father or his dog equals his? However, Hamm does not go on with the conversation, he abruptly changes the topic, saying "I'm going to bed", thus starting to banalize one of the important themes to which Beckett only hints in his play. However, Clov does not want to put Hamm, and he justifies his refusal saying: "I have things to do". Clov's reason for his refusal to put Hamm to bed is that he is busy.

This leads the conversation to a necessary cul-de-sac: Hamm gives the order to Clove to get him ready for bed. However, Clov answers saying that he cannot do that because he is busy, leveling the conversation to an almost idiotic level. After that Hamm had started to speak about a great suffering, the speech about this great theme is abandoned, as to suggest that it is impossible to solve and he changes topic asking something to Clov. However, Clove gives a silly answer to Hamm. All the conversation leads to nothing, and everything is banalized. In a historical context, it is possible to say that the human of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is accustomed to pain, suffering and the like: suffering and pain are trivial, there is no necessity to talk about it. In Beckett's theatre everything becomes small talk, even talking about suffering; the actions do not lead anywhere and the conversations are useless and incomprehensible. In the context of afterwar literature, Beckett's plays find their power in the very awareness of the futility of art, which still continue to exist.

Specifically, "Get me ready", the words pronounced by Hamm, can be considered as an order in the *Speech Act Theory*, which is an illocutionary act (Austin 1962); furthermore, Hamm adds an element of volition: 'I want to sleep'. Going on with the reading, we see that Clov abandons his wish to sleep. So, there seems to be also an element of intentionality in what he is saying, which one could relate to the general psychological component in conversations (Searle 2002). What Hamm says is an order, so is pragmatically an action: in the play, the language-action is promptly deactivated. This conversation does not bring anywhere, going against the same

conversational norms by Grice (Grice 1975). And whatever happens, it will be like that until the end of the play, which is a continuous exchange of conversations which do not lead anywhere but which stay on the paper and on scene, giving credit to an aesthetic of superficiality created by Beckett, interpreter of the afterwar literature, when the humans did not have anything to talk about and it was not possible anymore to deal with the big problems of philosophy and literature: what is left and what is necessary “to continue to express” is the creation of an aesthetic game which does not solve or try to solve the great themes of Western tradition, but which necessary and sufficient for the continuation of literature. In his plays, Beckett configures an aesthetic of small talk, alfa and omega of his literature.

If we consider Beckett’s plays from this standpoint is possible to give credit to a literal interpretation of Beckett’s texts, which emerged from the *tabula rasa* of history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after which the humans without any certainties found an interpreter in Beckett/artist who refuses to interpret the great themes of literature, and in doing so he creates plays which are games, in which the profoundness becomes superficiality, a symptom of an epidermic style of writing intended to show to the reader and to the public what is left to show: words, words, words.

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