Dying-on

Beckett’s Elemental Ghosts

Carla Locatelli

Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.

[...] Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own mood interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

(Samuel Taylor Coleridge
“Frost at Midnight”)

So stands there facing blank wall.
Dying on […]

Thirty thousand nights of ghosts beyond.
Beyond the black beyond…

(Beckett 1986, 426, 429)

Spectral word-play

How does one respond to these two expressions: “Spectres de
Beckett”/“Spectral Beckett”? They produce a different signifying process
(but ultimately not different meanings), since they are a close and brilliant
translation of one into the other. So, it is just an accentuation, an economy

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of interpretation, which makes a difference in what is evoked in either one
or the other expression. We could say there is a different path of emphasis
within the signification process. Let me clarify: I read “spectres de Beckett” as
alluding with an equal semantic force, and simultaneously, to both Beckett’s
spectres as produced in his work, and the specters of the returning Beckett, as “ghost”
in our cultural history (both Eurocentric and non-Eurocentric). This equal
semantic force and simultaneity owes to the ubiquitous force of the French
genitive, since “spectres de Beckett” refers to both Beckett himself and/or to
the specters fabricated in/through his work.

On the other hand, “Spectral Beckett” seems to emphasize both
meanings, not as simultaneous but as parallel: “spectral Beckett” certainly
does not preclude thinking of the ghost characters, and of the ghosting
process of/in his work, but it seems to evoke, at first, the Beckett-as-ghost,
i.e., the specter of Beckett in the sense of Beckett as influence, as authority,
or even as authorial trace.

These are obviously minimal differences, but indeed typical Beckettian
differences between and within language(s): differences of the signifying
process, and of the time of understanding.

In any case, I can say that this Conference invited us to respond to
“spectral Beckett,” both in relation to a textual Beckett, and in relation to
the Beckett produced by reception of his work.
What are Specters? And who is Ghosting?
The complexity of the theme we are addressing here has been suggested in the rich allusions of the Conference Program, and, obviously also in the variety of contributions to the critical spectrum produced by Beckettian scholars in time.

Just a few years ago, the understanding of Beckett’s specters would have been focused on the referential implications of ghosts as characters, and/or on formal evocations and re-presentations, mostly related to a genealogy of characters, not necessarily anthropomorphic.

One could say that in the 1990s Ruby Cohn’s “Ghosting through Beckett” opened the way to a critical discussion shifting focus from “ghosts” to “ghosting.” At the level of “literary aesthetic,” ghosting has been interpreted as canonical repetition, as allusion, as re-membrance, for example, referring to the “M-laden phantasmagoria” detected in the Beckettian corpus, together with the long list of characters “haunted by their predecessors” (Cohn 1993).

More recently, specters (encompassing Platonic phântasma, and various “transaesthetic” simulacra, such as the ones described by Jean Baudrillard (1993), have highlighted the ever-changing cultural visibility that differentiates specters.

Specters are cultural formations: both psychoanalysts and hermeneutic philosophers agree with Baudrillard, in the field of “psycho-aesthetics.” Didier Anzieu (1992), Angela Moorjani (1992, 2004) and Leslie Hill (1990),
prominent among others, have outlined the importance of ghosts at both the cultural and unconscious level.\textsuperscript{2}

Personally, I propose to see Beckett’s \textit{ghosts} also as the \textit{principal figurations of an epistemological effort}, and therefore also as an ethical engagement with\textit{(in)} writing. Specters in Beckett are so pervasive that I would talk about “spectral forms” and “spectral stages” in Beckett, since ghostly apparitions are both representations (characters) and chronological formations of formal patterns, with different epistemological functions. These formal patterns, in particular, manifest the “elemental” quality of Beckett’s ghosts, which can be made of mere sounds (“\textit{ping}”, “\textit{on}”, breath, etc.), or be basic mechanisms of cognition.

Beckettian ghosts \textit{stage} (both verbally, figuratively, and literally “on stage”):

1. the limits of body and mind, and of “\textit{life}” and “\textit{death},” and thus they challenge the notion of taking them as opposites.
2. specters call attention to the ontological frame of language and understanding, and
3. they point to the affective failure of asseverating \textit{Alterity}. (Remember the exemplary and obsessively reiterated “Pictures of… he \textit{all but said of loved ones}” in \textit{A Piece of Monologue}). (Beckett 1986)\textsuperscript{3}

I believe that specters are central figurations in Beckett because they are the main apparatus for the exploration, and for the interrogation, of the conditions of possibility of representation, perception, understanding and alterity.
Reading Specters and Specters Reading

At this point, I would like to open up the question: are the textual ghosts and the authorial ghost really separable? And if so, on what ground? Doesn’t the very “effectiveness” of specters cancel the possibility of their differentiation? In the words of Derrida: “Is there, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up?” (Derrida 1994, 10).

Are textual production and textual reception, and thus the ghostly projections and formations of both character(s) and author, really divisible? Thirty years of reception theory have answered this question in the negative, and so have poststructuralist autobiographic theories of authorship, albeit from a totally different point of view. However, this coincidence of hermeneutical answers coming from heterogeneous protocols of investigation signals the hermeneutical relevance of such a questioning, inasmuch as it –ultimately- an interrogation of the possibility of reading without creating the ghost of an author, and of reading without interpreting characters as (non)-specters.

Authorship is ghostly in the sense that it is (and simultaneously is not) autobiographical. De Man says: “any book with a readable title page is, to some extent autobiographical” (De Man 1984, 70). Thus the author is a ghost, playing with autobiographical visibility and invisibility (Locatelli 2008). De Man’s ghosts are inescapable “systems of tropes,” inscribed in specular models of cognition, between author and reader, activated by reflexive models that produce “an alignment between the two subjects
involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution” (De Man 1984, 70).

This means that a “spectral Beckett” is produced by a reader, one reading autobiographically the author of/in the text, but it also means that Beckettian ghosts are the ones some texts may lead to construct, by portraying seers as seen by seers; by narrating self-performers of performed self-narrations, and by creating a whole series of doubles, whose haunting quality is linked to the unsettling scenario of intra-psychic communication (and cognitive longing, in the case of Beckett).

The pursuit of an identification of the specter, as Derrida highlights in his reading of *Hamlet*, is, to begin with, the acceptance of the law of “a spectral asymmetry [which] interrupts [here] all specularity” (Derrida 1990, 6). It is, for example, the disquieting interruption that forbids the meeting of Murphy and Endon in *Murphy*: “Each made his move in the absence of the other…”: one does not appear without the other having already disappeared and one appears as disappearance in the gaze of the other. “The last Mr Murphy saw of Mr Endon was Mr Murphy unseen by Mr Endon. This was also the last Murphy saw of Murphy”: specularity is challenged at the very moment in which it is (set) at work (Beckett 1973, 106 and 140).

Two points in Derrida’s reading of *Hamlet* seem to me particularly relevant in reading Beckett: 1) one is the emphasis on the oscillation between visibility and invisibility in ghostly apparitions; and another one 2) is the obligation to fall back on the voice, when we cannot see, in the sense that “we cannot identify in all certainty.”
Derrida, reading the Shakespearian “waiting for the Specter” notices: “The Thing is still invisible, it is *nothing visible* [...] at the moment one speaks of it and in order to ask oneself if it has reappeared” (Derrida 1994, 6). Murphy’s gaze and puzzlement in seeing his invisibility in Endon’s gaze is not very different from the invisibility of the Derridean “nothing visible” in Endon’s gaze (“the last at last seen of him / himself unseen by him / and of himself”) (Beckett 1973, 140). In this line of thinking, we can ask how different is Godot, “still invisible,” at the end of the play, but whose return is still waited for, not only at the end of the play, but also in relation to the waiting for him at the moment one speaks of him.

The alternation of seeing things and “imaginings” in *Ill Seen Ill Said* shows the specter as always already working in human understanding. “Confusion *amounting to nothing*,” as Beckett describes it, constitutes the cognitive scenario of Beckett’s interrogations. It is a ghostly scenario: “Things and imaginings. As of always. [...] despite precautions. If only she could be pure figment. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman” (Beckett 1996, 78). She is “so dying” and thus she cannot be “pure figment.” Does “so dying” mean “dead”? No. Not quite. Almost. Is she then a specter, returning to herself (almost herself), but not as a mere “figment of the imagination”, nor as the return of the signifier, but as the specter of herself, lessened by old age.

In relation to the Beckett *corpus* we can certainly talk also of a textual “reference” to specters, but only so long as we do not want to “win credence” (Beckett 1996, 3) for the stability of (such) referents. So, specifically, we have to renounce seeking the stability of ghosts. We just have
to let them appear, and do their work, eventually working within the
metamorphosis of our gaze, and mirroring it back to us.

Spectral Economy

I believe that the very fact that ghost characters in Beckett do not exhaust
his specter formations tells us that the function of specters is not representative but
economical: ghosts in Beckett mobilize representation, rather than constitute
representation.

Many verbs in the gerund or infinitive mode perform or call attention to
ghosting (rather than to referential ghosts), as a way of understanding. Think
of the use of lexemes such as “devising,” “imagining;” or of prepositions and
adverbs, such as “still” and “on,” and of diacritical marks such as the
prosopopeic “Ping.” All of them: gerunds, prepositions, and adverbs are
“ghostly,” inasmuch as they make visible the unseen, and make the visible
invisible (Locatelli 1999). I am quoting from That Time (1976): “…when you
opened your eyes from floor to ceiling nothing only dust and not a sound
only what was it said come and gone was that it something like that come
and gone come and gone no one come and gone in no time gone in no
time” (Beckett 1986, 395).

The expression “it said come and gone” led me to valorize the temporal
expression “dying on,” first formulated in A Piece of Monologue (1979), for
reasons that can be summarized in the unique Beckettian synthesis of
ontology and mortality. Can we ever know “ontology” (starting with “on”), if
not through the limits of our “dying-on”? This is how Beckett formulates his
question. This seems to me the radical scenario of Beckett’s thought, at least starting with *A Piece of Monologue*, which opens with the Speaker’s words: “Birth was the death of him. Again. Words are few. Dying too. Birth was the death of him. Ghastly grinning ever since” (Beckett 1986, 423).

“Dying on” and “living on” are identical opposites, or, as Deleuze would call them, they are “inclusive disjunctions” (Deleuze 1997). “The maxima and minima of particular contraries are one and indifferent ... Consequently transmutations are circular” (Beckett 1984, 21). The transmutations of life and death produce a “dying on,” not a “sur-viving,” because of the “ever less” always consuming life: “So stands there facing blank wall. Dying on. No more no less. No less. Less to die. Ever less. Like light at nightfall” (Beckett 1986, 425 and 426).

Beckett calls “*rigor vitae*...the weight of congenital prejudice” (Beckett 1984, 95) which makes us think of life as a solid continuity, determined by the distinguishable dichotomy of life/death, that leads us to forget “the unaccountable” and the ghostly component inscribed in it. Experience itself is under scrutiny and challenge; here is an example from *A Piece of Monologue*, again, and again because it probably constitutes the most radical definition of ghosts, as “the radical unaccountable,” resisting conceptual dichotomies: “Thirty thousand nights of ghosts beyond. Beyond the black beyond. Ghost light. Ghost nights. Ghost rooms. Ghost graves. Ghost ... he all but said ghost loved ones. [...] Till half hears there are no other matters. Never two matters. Never but the one matter. The dead and gone. The dying and the going. From the word go. *The word* begone. *Such as the light going now*” (Beckett 1986, 429).
Paying attention to such mobility, to such a dynamic “army of tropes” (to paraphrase Nietzsche in *Truth and Lying*, 1989, 246-257), has led me to valorize Beckett’s formal dynamism: the burn up is constant, and inextinguishable, but there is no essential difference between “the dead and gone” and “the dying and the going”, since they are perceivable “from the word to go”.

Specters propagate within an ever-lessening background (existential, cognitive, and material); they proliferate in a diminishing world of ageing, disease, and mutilation in which physical expansion, perception and cognition constantly lose ground. Yet, they never come to an end, no matter how they long for it: they keep coming back.

I think that *Worstward Ho* (1983), in which the “on” is pervasive and obsessive, helps us to understand that Beckett’s “on” does not just underscore the synthesis of spatial and temporal coordinates (linking the preposition “on top of” – as in: “on top of it”, a cumulative-concessive spatial expression - , and/or the adverb “without stopping”, as in: “on and on”, indicating temporal repetition). By so doing, the “on” also inscribes movement in such language-signified ontology: ontology is not static, nor abstract; it is both spatial and temporal. Let us take as an example the opening of *Worstward Ho*: “On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on.” In spite of the longing for it, there is no absolute “nohow on;” it may be said, but we must remember that: “from now say for be missaid” (Beckett 1996, 89).
In this context, failure is not bound to aesthetic professionalism (which Beckett derides, referring to an art “weary of its puny exploits, weary of...going a little further along a dreary road.” (Beckett 1984, 139)), but regards “the issueless predicament of existence” (Beckett 1984, 97): “No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still. // All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever Tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” Blanchot describes the Beckettian endeavor in these terms: “He devotes all his energy to not writing, so that, writing, he should write out of failure, in failure’s intensity” (Blanchot 1995, 11).

“Dying on” resonates with Beckett’s declared admiration for Bram van Velde, seen as a failing artist, “ideal as well as material,” (Beckett 1984, 143) and it reiterates Beckett’s reading of Joyce, and his understanding of the work of art as “expression”: “The inner elemental vitality and corruption of expression imparts a furious restlessness to the form, which is admirably suited to the purgatorial aspect of the work. There is an endless verbal germination, maturation, putrefaction, the cyclic dynamism of the intermediate” (Beckett 1984, 29, emphasis added). Words such as “ elemental,” “restlessness,” “purgatorial,” and the paradigm linking “germination-maturation-putrefaction” weave the fabric of a knowledge and expression of life as “the cyclic dynamism of the intermediate,” whose orientation is towards consummation, whose texture is consumed, and yet, which has no specific direction, existence being an “issueless predicament” (Beckett 1984, 97).

In a sense, “Ur-Spinozian”, long before Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of Spinoza, Beckett anticipates some of the themes that they have recently
developed, because of his attention to the pervasive transformation of the forms of the living, and his valorization of immanence. This is the way Deleuze and Guattari illustrate Spinoza’s endeavour: “Spinoza was the philosopher who knew full well that immanence was only immanent to itself and therefore that it was a plane traversed by movements of the infinite, filled with intensive ordnates” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 48). Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari maintain that: “the plane of immanence is like a section of chaos and acts, like a sieve. In fact, chaos is characterized less by the absence of determinations than by the infinite speed with which they take shape and vanish. This is not a movement from one determination to the other but, on the contrary, the impossibility of a connection between them, since one does not appear without the other having already disappeared, and one appears as disappearance when the other disappears as outline” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 42, emphasis added). The crucial concern about a connection between determinations surfaces both in “Dante...Bruno . Vico ..Joyce”, and in The Lost Ones (1972) where the issue of allegory is central to the Beckettian argument, against “analogymongers”: “Allegory implies a threefold intellectual operation: the construction of a message of general significance, the preparation of a fabulous form, and an exercise of considerable technical difficulty in uniting the two” (Beckett 1984, 26) At the Spinozan immanent level, relentless determinations do not hold, and that is why Beckett warns us: “The danger is in the neatness of identifications” (Beckett 1984, 19).

Individuals might believe they have directions, but “the cyclic dynamism of the intermediate” is non-directional, much like movement in The Lost Ones
(1972), where just “for amateurs of myth lies hidden a way out to earth and sky” (Beckett 1972, 21). Derision of allegory, in a “profound risolino that does not destroy,” reiterates Beckett’s definition of it as “that glorious double entry with every credit in the said account a debit in the meant, and inversely” (Beckett 1984, 89-90). Allegory is a bad ghost, promising what it fails to deliver, and yet it is, much like myth and analogy, an extensive cognitive tool and trait of the human mind.

Beckett does not explicitly take up the Kantian doctrine of transcendental principles, nor the Heideggerian question of the “thing in itself,” and yet, he is very critical of allegory as a sort of “doubled” analogy (reiterating correspondences already presumed in the first place). Heidegger had said: “What could be more obvious than that man transposes his propositional way of understanding things into the structure of the thing itself? Yet this view, seemingly critical, yet actually rash and ill-considered, would have to explain first how such a transposition of propositional structure into the thing is supposed to be possible…” (Heidegger 1971, 24). Beckett too locates in analogy the key to our first understanding of being in and naming the world: “The child extends the names of the first familiar objects to other strange objects in which he is conscious of some analogy” (Beckett 1984, 25). However Beckett forcefully resists, by “failing better”, the direct transposition of “propositional structure into the thing”.

So, for him, analogy is spectral; it is a projection of the familiar onto the unfamiliar by way of signs; by way of an “inner elemental vitality and corruption of expression” (Beckett 1984, 29). The ambivalence of the analogical and allegorical ghost is its haunting and distinctive trait.
The vitality of chaos keeps surfacing, in spite of the attempt to organize thought through language and art: “I have discerned a disfaction, a désuni, an Ungebund, a flottement, a tremblement, a tremor, a tremolo, a disaggregating, a disintegrating, an efflorescence, a breaking down and multiplication of tissue, the corrosive ground-swell of Art” (Beckett 1984, 49).

The Instability of Elemental Ghosts and “aporia pure and simple”

An “elemental vitality and corruption of expression” sustains the indecidability of specter-definition through which Beckett educates us to the possibilities of the gaze. The gaze is an irreducible relation between the beholder (not necessarily anthropomorphic, as in Film, for example), and the “object” beheld; it is the site of radical flux and unsteadiness, which affects vision (of material objects, formal patterns, and conditions of expression), and eventually underscores the inescapability of the “ill seen ill said.” Angela Moorjani has repeatedly highlighted in Beckett the “instability that keeps viewers and readers from settling into fixed position of seeing” (Moorjani 2008, 189).

In Beckett, the de-termination of a gaze is primarily a near-termination of what has been determined, to the point that one could say there is no “original scene” in his works, but a sequence of dis-avowed habitual recognition of material and mental objects. In this sense, a radical hermeneutics conceived as ontology (along the lines theorized by Heidegger
(1959 and 1962) and Gadamer (1976 and 2003)), is always already a ghostly understanding (“The eye will close in vain. To see but haze. Not even. Be itself but haze. How can it ever be said?” (Beckett 1996, 78)).

Thus, inhabiting instability is, in my opinion, the extreme epistemological and cognitive call coming from Beckett’s specters and the spectral Beckett. This is epitomized in the protagonist of Ill Seen Ill Said: “She is vanishing. With the rest. The already ill seen bedimmed and ill seen again annulled. The mind betrays the treacherous eyes and the treacherous world their treacheries. Haze sole certitude. […] The eye will close in vain. To see but haze. Not even. Be itself but haze. How can it ever be said?” (Beckett 1996, 78). And how can it ever be seen if the eye is “itself but haze”?

As Derrida observes in relation to Hamlet father’s ghost: “Since we do not see the one who sees us, and makes the law […] we cannot identify it in all certainty, we must fall back on its voice. […] An essentially blind submission to his secret, to the secret of its origin: this is a first obedience to the injunction. It will conditions all the others” (Derrida 1994, 7). For Beckett the submission is made evident by the impossibility to express and the obligation to express, synthesized here in the questioning “How can it ever be said?” The blind submission is the enforced condition of knowing, and thus of inhabiting the aporia of an irreducibly hazy “certitude.”

In Company the very opening of narration indicates the secret of origins and the manifestation of voice: “A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine” (Beckett 1996, 3). There is nothing to be done but fall back on the voice. If we substitute Hamlet’s “Fathers’ Spirit” with light and voice as (Beckett’s)
“elemental” ghosts, we can understand the inescapable injunction he calls “the obligation to express” when “there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express…” (Beckett 1984, 139). In this sense, Light and Voice are the elemental ghosts in Beckett; they are symptoms of his pre-representational ontology: “A voice comes to one in the dark” (Beckett 1996, 3). And: “Faint light in the room. Unutterably faint. Whence Unknown” (Beckett 1996, 427).

Deleuze has provided the most fascinating map of “Language I, II and III” in Beckett, highlighting the difference, but also the implications of these languages, functional to naming, or to voicing, or to producing procedural images, all haunted by an irreducible cupio dissolvo (Deleuze 1997). I perceive this death wish as the frustration caused by the “blind submission” that Light and Voice require; yet, I agree with Didier Anzieu’s perception of a resistance to the death wish, and a counter movement of “the negative turned against itself.”

The impossibility of inhabiting indecidability, and the impossibility of finding a way out of it, and out of “the inescapability of self-perception,” (Beckett 1986, 323) are represented in/through Beckett’s elemental ghosts as the unaccountable ontology: “I know now, all that was just… play. And all this? When will all this- […] All this, when will all this have been… just play?” (Beckett 1996, 313).

Gadamer’s notion of “Play as the Clue to Ontological Explanation” implies that “Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. […] The mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave toward
play as if toward an object” (Gadamer 2003, 102). The Beckettian inquiry when asking: “All this, when will all this have been… just play?” questions the event quality of human involvement vis à vis the conceptual definition of such an involvement. The question can be deceitful inasmuch as it implies the possibility of escaping “play” (“have been …just play”), and thus produces the illusion of avoiding the always already “being played/playing”. As Gadamer maintains: “The players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation (Darstellung) through the players” (Gadamer 2003, 103).

The re-presentation of ontology, i.e. the submission of the play of the real, in order to preserve the symbolic, is won at the cost of being played by it: “Whoever ‘tries’ is in fact the one who is tried” (Gadamer 2003, 106).

Beckett both subverts and confirms the inescapability of play, in suggesting not to try resisting it, or –more precisely- in proposing to “try fail” in it. His “fidelity to failure” is a submission and an admission: “unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation” (Beckett 1984, 145).

The Extremity of the Extreme?

In his discussion of specters in relation to ontology, Derrida has spoken of “hauntology”, a suggestion that in my opinion applies very well to Beckett. Derrida has suggested that: “Repetition and first time: [this] is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost. […] What is the effectivity or the presence of a specter […]? Is there between the thing itself and its
simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? [...] This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being [...] How comprehend in fact the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end? Can the extremity of the extreme ever be comprehended? And the opposition between “to be” and “not to be”? (Derrida 1994, 10).

Beckett’s “hauntology,” records the ill comprehension of the oscillation between the thing itself and the simulacrum, played “at most mere minimum”: “Dim light source unknown. Know minimum. Know nothing no. Too much to hope. At most mere minimum. Mere most minimum” (Beckett 1996, 91).

Beckett’s “hauntology” indicates that there is no absolute knowing and no absolute not-knowing: how can we tell if there is an opposition “between the thing itself and its simulacrum”? Yet again, he compels readers to confront the sheer indecidability of interpretation and reading, and to subsume, at the conceptual level, “aporia pure and simple” and to consider, at the procedural level “...affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or soon or later...” (Beckett 1958, 291). This famous quotation, at the beginning of The Unnamable, situates the living-in-aporia as the site of writing, an abstract writing which resists concept-formation (since the concept is functional to establishing “affirmations” and “negations”), as the necessary requisite for accommodating chaos.

Accommodating chaos is a recurrent imperative in Beckett, and Deleuze and Guattari help us to describe this “chaos,” and thus grasp the implications of such an imperative of accommodation: “... chaos is
characterized less by the absence of determinations than by the infinite speed with which they take shape and vanish” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 42). In *Ill seen Ill said* Beckett talks of a: “here without cease the earth faintly quaked” (Beckett 1996, 57, emphasis added). This is not a movement from one determination to the other, but on the contrary, “the impossibility of a connection between them, since one does not appear without the other having already disappeared, and one appears as outline” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 42). The scopic privilege of seeing chaos is produced in Beckett by a lap-dissolve and/or a cross-fade series of representations which make “a toy of thought”, a specter of thought and a spectral activity of thinking.

Rather than stability of determinations, Beckettian verbal repetitions and images appear and disappear, with no force of affirmation. Invalidation follows validation, so that the specter of affirmation returns, not as confirmation, but as the trace of the almost lost. According to Deleuze and Guattari, precisely this movement defines philosophical thinking and, therefore, philosophy is in a perpetual state of digression.

Think of *Cascando* (1962), where the reversal of material reality into ghostly representation characterizes the whole play. Here, the character Opener highlights the heterogeneous perception and predication of subjects subjected to aberrant representations: “They say, That is not his life, he does not live on that. They don’t see me, they don’t see what my life is, they don’t see what I live on, and they say, That is not his life, he does not live on that.” And then: “From one world to another, it’s as though they drew together. We have not much further to go. Good.” At the “end” of the play, when Voice
and Music come together, they can only witness the return of representations as the return of an unending “Cascando”, a “free” fall: “- this time…it’s the right one… finish… no more new stories… sleep… we’re there… nearly..................................................just a few more… don’t let go…” (Beckett 1986, 300-304, emphasis added).

Ghost characters and authorial ghosts of “new stories” might amount to being the same by-product: a trace and/or the trace of a trace (Derrida 1976), so that story telling itself becomes a mere ghosting production. A radical question on the possibility of the definitive and actual end of stories (and, extensively, of all figurations), is asked also in Ill Seen Ill Said, and concerns the if and how we can escape the semiosis producing creation as we know it: “Already all confusion. Things and imaginings. As of always” (Beckett 1996, 58). The longing for the end is pervasive, ghostly and ghastly, because the innuendo of the end is always already postponed by the “on-going process of ending.” No ending can ever end.

Thus, as I have already said, living-on and dying on, are but one movement, inextricably rooted in the hauntological “on,” which inscribes both time and space in the simultaneity of the subject/object, and subjective/objective figurations.

Motion; Commotion; Devotion, and Ghastly Repetitions “for to end yet again”

What I find truly unheimlich in Beckett is the fact that it is not clear if specters compensate, or sanction human finitude, the one made visible in corporeal
degeneration. Ultimately, his “hauntology” produces the sense of chaos because what remains is only the trace of an infinite movement, of “the earth faintly quaked,” rather than a sign of human power and authority.

The never definitive form of human finitude described by Dider Anzieu is recurrent throughout Beckett’s *First Trilogy*, and in many of the plays, especially in *En attendant Godot* (1952), *Play* (1964), *Footfalls* (1976) and in *A Piece of Monologue* (1979). We could say that the movement of human finitude constitutes the Leitmotiv of the *Second Trilogy*, and is epitomized in the protagonist of *Ill seen Ill Said*: “Such helplessness to move she cannot help” (Beckett 1996, 49). The pun highlights the link between physical and verbal implications, which is pervasive in Beckett: how can we (not) read the body as the site of a text in which proliferations of meanings constantly move from one level of understanding onto others, through colliding scientific (referential), allegorical, analogical, and even anagogical meanings?

Beckett’s theorization of a “literature of the unword” (“Literatur des Unworts” (Beckett 1984, 54) is irreducibly dynamic; it is an imperative and a task implying an “unwording the world”, in which a wide-ranging specter of different ghosts supplies the *prosopopeias* expressing the plane of immanence as pre-conceptual, as the hauntological “on”, in which a radical discrediting of language (as Beckett calls it in his German Letter of 1937) takes place.

As has been previously maintained, and extensively argued, especially in relation to Beckett’s “Second Trilogy”, “unwording the world” is in Beckett both an artistic and a philosophical task (Locatelli 1990), one that addresses the issue of “thought” as defined by Deleuze and Guattari: “What defines
thought in its three great forms – art, science, and philosophy – is always confronting chaos, laying out a plane, *throwing a plane over chaos*” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 197).

Beckett’s conceptual personae and aesthetic figures are hardly distinguishable, but they are ghostly, in that they deterritorialize sensation as they extend it, “… making it pass through a sort of deframing which opens it up and breaks it open onto an infinite cosmos” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 197). In this sense, Beckett is a protagonist of that abstract and conceptual art that Deleuze and Guattari describe as follows: “Abstract art and conceptual art are two recent attempts to bring art and philosophy together, but they do not substitute the concept for the sensation; rather they create sensations and not concepts. Abstract art seeks only to refine sensation, to dematerialize it by setting out an architectonic plane of composition…” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 198).

I hope to have demonstrated how Beckett’s architectonic plan keeps pointing to ghosts and ghosting, by using them, and by showing how pervasive they are as instruments and toys of thought. Specters never come to an end; as a matter of fact, they forbid the closure of representation, of thought, and of love. Baudrillard muses: “Nothing (not even God) now disappears by coming to an end, by dying. Instead, things disappear through proliferation, or contamination, by becoming saturated or transparent, because of extenuation or extermination, or as a result of the epidemics of simulation…” (Baudrillard 1994, 4).
Unwording resists the “epidemics of simulation” inasmuch as it questions the Heideggerian propositional way of understanding (as indicative of the structure of “the thing itself”). The movement of subtraction reveals that even the void is spectral, always already doubled by figurations and representations: “The void. Unchanging. Say now unchanging. Void where not the one. The twain. So far where not the one and twain. So far. // The void How try say? How try fail? No try no fail. Say only-” (Beckett 1996, 96).

On the way to “Say only-”, “missay” and “unword”, the “try fail” is needed in order to resist the mourning “attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead.” Beckett’s question “how try say?” and the answer “Say only-” indicate that “all ontologization, all semanticization – philosophical, hermeneutical, or psychoanalytical- finds itself caught up in this work of mourning but, as such, it does not yet think it” (Derrida 1994, 9). Thus, “Say only-” not only means that interpretation too is “spectral”, i.e., impermanent and dynamic: ultimately, I think it poses “the question of the specter to the specter…” (Derrida 1994, 9).

The spectral Beckett’s has certainly helped us see it.

See also: Houppermann, 1996.

Quotation repeated on p. 426 and 300; 301 and 304. Emphasis added to highlight the ghostly function of that semantic “almost.”

The variety of contributions make it impossible to do justice to the field of “Reader Response Criticism” and “Reception Theory.” I will recall some of its early protagonists, both European and Americans: Wolfgang Iser, 1974 and 1978; Hans Robert Jauss, 1982; Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, 1980; Stanley Fish, 1980; Jane P. Tompkins, 1980.

Beckett 1958, 291.

Here is a more extended quotation indicating Anzieu’s reading of Beckett’s task: “Dèjouer les Séductions, les perversions, les ruses de la pulsion de mort. Retourner le négatif contre lui-même” (Anzieu, 1992, 257).

I would like to quote another intense ethical statement about Beckett’s work in Anzieu: “Maintenir l’amour dans l’écart entre l’abandon à l’autre et l’abandon de l’autre. […] Pour donner indéfiniment, de notre humaine finitude, une forme jamais définitive” (Anzieu 1992, 257).
Works Cited


Fish, Stanley. *Is there a Texttr in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980.


