

## DISCUSSING SAMUEL BECKETT'S *THE UNNAMABLE* AN INTERVIEW WITH FERNANDO DE TORO

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Doctor Fernando de Toro has honored us by accepting to answer questions on his article *The Limits of Language, Deconstruction and Rhizomaticity – The Unnamable by Samuel Beckett/ Os Limites da Linguagem, Desconstrução e Rizomática – O Inominável de Samuel Beckett*. The Portuguese version of the mentioned text, translated by Fernando Biagini Junior, features the 26<sup>th</sup> edition of Inventário Journal. De Toro has been conducting studies on Beckett's work for a long time and shares his experience while answering our questions. Toro calls attention to aspects of Beckett's works and stresses that "in order to read Beckett we must modify how we normally read". The analysis of Beckett's work tends to be quite complex. De Toro presents the



paths he has taken as a researcher, mentioning authors such as Lacan, Barthes, Foucault, and Heidegger. He also shares his point of view on Beckett's contributions to contemporary literature, saying that "have created a 'literature' that does not have any precedent". Thus, this interview can be quite helpful to researchers aiming to develop studies on Beckett's works, but it might also be a contribution to anyone interested in understanding the paradigms of contemporary literature.

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**Fernando de Toro** is a Full Professor in the Department of English, Film and Theatre at the University of Manitoba, Canada. He obtained his B.A. from Carleton University in 1972, and, two years later, his M.A. from the same institution. His specialty was in Spanish and Spanish American Literature, having practical knowledge of English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian languages. In 1980, Dr. de Toro graduated with a Ph.D. from the University of Montreal. Thereafter, post-doctoral studies awaited him at the Institut d'Etudes Théâtrales at The University of Paris III in the area of Theatre Semiotics (the study of signs). Dr. de Toro's academic career saw positions at many eastern Canadian universities until 1998 when he arrived at the University of Manitoba to assume the Deanship in the Faculty of Graduate Studies. Subsequent to his term, he lectured at universities in Ukraine, Mexico, and Argentina and ultimately returned to the Dept. of English at the University of Manitoba<sup>3</sup>.

**1. Samuel Beckett's literature is widely considered very complex. As you have been studying his work for quite a long time, what do you think researchers need to develop solid studies on Beckett's texts?**

Well, when I began researching the narrative and the "performances" I found a systemic problem throughout the very extensive production of critical studies, both, books and articles. Following a practice since the beginning of my academic career, first I read his narrative and performance work, and then I began to research with a direction. I was attempting to locate any criticism that could explained some of the works which were incomprehensible to me. I found only a handful! In addition, I discovered, to my surprise, a pattern in this criticism: they all will use a segment or a phrase they found in any given text by Beckett, and build from there a full article. Most of the criticism revolves around matters outside the texts, religion, philosophy, biography, etc. Right from the start, I asked a fundamental question: Why did Beckett choose to write in this manner, one that empties the text from "meaning" and flattens any possibility of a traditional interpretation? If we start attempting to answer this key question, perhaps tip-toeing around Beckett's texts, would cease. In this respect there is nothing written I have not seen this question in the criticism I have read, which is substantial. I felt that if one could provide a response, even a partial one, to this question, we could arrive at some solid understanding of this very complex writer, which in fact, is unreadable. So, my answer to your question is twofold: First, I am in no position to suggest anything to any specialist about how approach Beckett (lots of unnecessary ink and paper has been wasted in these

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<sup>3</sup> Information on Doctor De Toro's career was taken from the University of Manitoba's official website. Available in: [https://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate\\_studies/aboutus/past\\_deans\\_old.html](https://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/aboutus/past_deans_old.html). Access on: 01 Dez. 2020.

many decades). Some of them have been studying Beckett for over sixty years. Second, I have provided my own response to my question, and I have been writing about it. And then we realize that we have only an isotopic (concentration on a thematic fragment) reading option.

## **2. Can you talk a bit more about Beckett's textual strategies, which are strongly associated with disarticulating textual syntax and semantic notions?**

As I mentioned at the beginning of my article, I pointed out that I recognize, at least, four textual strategies, which are shared by all his narrative and performances: a) the rhizomatic structure; b) the end of representation; c) language and the Subject and d) the obliteration of meaning. These strategies allow me to get away from the pure thematic analysis, and concentrate on the text as text, letting them speak by themselves. These strategies are not imposed on the text, but they emerge from the texts, as I demonstrated in my analysis of *The Unnamable*. Briefly, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome is a structure, that is the deployment of the text is random: it lacks any systematic structure. This brings up the question of how to read Beckett? My reflexion on Beckett, and this is all I could say on my position regarding his texts, stems from the estrangement of the reading process, of reading that demands a radical change in our horizon of expectations (Erwartungshorizont, Jauss, 1977) vis-à-vis the text: we find a voice with an uncontrollable gush of words without origin, without beginning or end; a text grafted by a rhizomatic structure (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), always in movement, and with a meaning permanently virtual and differed (Derrida). It seems that from the first page of *The Unnamable* we are gasping for air (some form of plot), but then we soon realize that we have to change our reading strategy.

Regarding the end of representation in Beckett, this is related to language's capacity to represent and allow expression (mimesis in Aristotle's terms is, without any doubt, what Beckett obliterates in *The Unnamable*: here anything that may resemble representation evaporates and the text splinters in infinitely deferred inscriptions of language. What does Beckett obliterate? Indeed, language and narration as it had been known from the Greeks until Modernity. In *The Unnamable* there is no narrator, but a voice without origin that does not narrate anything: it only expresses an incomprehensible utterance where the narrator is dissolved in a voice, in the sound of unarticulated words and lacking, as the textual rhizomatic structure which the voice inscribes, any directionality; it implodes the narration since there is no trace of a story to narrate. It is then a nomadic wandering of a voice which searches to constitute itself as the Subject of utterance but without success. There is nothing that might constitute itself as



fiction since no 'objects' are fictionalised, therefore nothing on what to focus by the narrative voice which we hear; the voice is not directed to the reader because it is reflexive, that is, it refers to itself.

### 3. In your opinion, what are the contributions of Samuel Beckett to contemporary literature?

Well, one of the major Beckett's contributions is to have created a "literature" that does not have any precedent. Beckett is an island, since he inserts a new paradigm (the unnamable literature), but like other paradigms (Kuhn), there is no normal science, that is a following of other writers, writing *à la* Beckett. The closer writings that may be compared to Beckett's may be the "novel" *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. This uniqueness, in my estimation, emerges from the need to find his own voice. Look at his situation: Beckett was born in 1906, and when he was in his twenties, to be exact, 28 years old, he met Joyce in 1928. By then, *Ulysses* was published in 1922 and had an immediate impact in European literature. Beckett worked closely with Joyce, particularly during the writing of *Finnegans Wake*, which after long seventeen years, was published in 1939, I believe that it is here when Beckett realized that this novel will be overwhelmed the whole literary space. So, what to do? By this time Beckett was thirty-six, and had produced one novel, *Murphy* (1938), a novel, in my estimation, that contained most of the elements of his later work.

Thus, clearly, he was not writing *à la* Joyce, and when, in 1945, Beckett went back home, to Dublin, had a moment of great clarity regarding the direction his writing should have taken. He also realized that it was impossible to overcome *Ulysses*, since its publication, everything that could be said about the modern novel, has been said. Regarding these points, Beckett said:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding. (*Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, 1997)

And this clarity led him to find his own voice, a voice which will characterize his entire *Œuvre*. And he will push the paradigm of Modernity, not only obliterating the very notion and practice of the novel, but also deconstructing the Joycean model itself. After Beckett there is no longer "Novel" or "Theatre" as we have known them.

#### 4. While studying Beckett's writing, what does one need to pay attention to when analysing the role of the Subject in the construction of the narrative?

The Subject is a very complex matter with many positions, which come from a variety of sources in my case, Lacan, Barthes, Foucault and Heidegger. What called my attention to this subject, were the first lines of *The Unnamable*:

I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me. These few general remarks to begin with. What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, **how to proceed? By aporia pure and simple?** Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? (1955: 291)

[...]

The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible, even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. And at the same time, I am obliged to speak. **I shall never be silent. Never.** (1955: 291)

The problematic relationship between the language and the Subject is articulated in one and only theme: language does not belong to the Subject. The Subject who speaks is the Subject of language and not the empirical Subject (the voice of *The Unnamable*) who appropriates a language that does not belong to It. The central theme, which constitutes the problematic of Beckett's writing is materialized, at the same time, in two additional central themes which travels throughout *The Unnamable* and, in fact, his entire oeuvre: 1) the aporistic expression of *The Unnamable* which oscillates between silence and the necessity to speak, and 2) the cancellation of meaning by a semantic vacuity and the self-annulation of all utterances. And this problematic remains unsolved, and that is why the voice asks the question "how to proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Why? Because the Subject desperately wants/needs to have Its own voice, but if he speaks, he disappears behind the Subject of language, and if he does not speak, It does not exist. Here lays the aporia; the contradiction cannot be overcome. The Subject introduces a theme, for instance when he speaks as a worm, and then proceed to another, and another, until there is a stop, and he declares that he is "restarting" once again in an attempt to re-seek Its own language.

[...] **I'll go silent, for want of air**, then the voice. I hardly hear it any more, then the **voice will come back and I'll begin again**. [...] I'm going silent. Hearing this voice no more, that's what I call going silent. [...] Listening hard, that what I call going silent. [...] Hearing it still, without hearing what it says, that's what I call going silent. (1955: 393)

These constant re-startings constitute the very structure of the nomadic character of the rhizome, and the voice continues to mumbling infinitely searching for Its own Subject. It, is a prisoner of language, as Heidegger said,

[...] language speaks solely with itself alone. A sentence of the text [of Novalis] is: "the peculiar property of language, namely that language is concerned exclusively with itself-precisely that is known to no one". (1971: 113)

[...]

[...] it is language alone which speaks authentically; and, language speaks lonesomely. (1971: 254) ([...] Sie spricht einzig und eiasm mit sich selber. Ein Satz des Textes lautet: "Gerade das Eigentümliche der Spachem daß sisich bloß um sich selbst bekümmert weiß keiner" 1959: 241)

**5. You mentioned in your article that a central characteristic of Beckett's work is the "total vacuity of time and space". Please, discuss this aspect a bit more and explain how it contributes to the narrative.**

Well, to start with, the text has no narrator. It is a voice, without origin, It (i.e. I - the voice) ends the text as It began. This voice, It, has no gender, It lives in "spaces" that are unidentifiable, in a non-time. We have no sense of where we are in the text. Beckett empties the text of any referentiality, this why I speak of "total vacuity of time and space". I speak of text in the sense of Barthes in his famous article of 1964, "La mort de l'auteur", because it is not a novel, it is only a trace of what a novel used to be, only because there is a flux of words, but there is no narration whatsoever. That is why I said at the beginning that Beckett flattens the surface of the text in such a manner that the reader not only cannot grapple the text, but in addition is unable to recognize any referentiality, any outside the text (Derrida: "il n'y a pas de hors-texte," - "there is nothing outside of the text" (Of Grammatology, 158). This is why I insist that in order to read Beckett we must modify how we normally read, that is, we must find way how to read his texts in order to answer our initial question.

**6. Can you discuss the two mechanisms present in The Unnamable associated with the obliteration of meaning?**

When we read a text by Beckett, the first impression (and it is a powerful one) we get is that we do not understand anything: where is the narrator, where is the plot, what

is being talked about? Thus, one of the ways Beckett implodes meaning is by deploying pure signifiers, that is, a whole series of sentences and words with nothing tying them down, and without reference, therefore making intelligibility impossible, and this removes the signified from any attempt to convey meaning. The other form of obliteration comes from the rhizomatic structure and the constant nomadic movement of the text that does not allow in stability of meaning. These writing practices are to be found in all Beckett's work.

### 7. What is the role of the silence in the narrative of *The Unnamable*?

I think that this intimately tied to functioning of the pure signifiers in the sense seems to be saying to language, "if I, as an empirical Subject, I slide under the signifier, and therefore do not speak, but language speaks, then, I stop language to speak by neutralizing the signifier, therefore it becomes silent. The whole quest of *The Unnamable* is a quest for silence:

[...] they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (1955: 414)

[...] with regard to me, that it has not yet been our good fortune to establish with any degree of accuracy what I am, where I am, whether I am words among words, or silence in the midst of silence [...]. (1955: 388)

### 8. When it comes to academic studies, why it is still relevant to discuss Beckett's deconstructivist perspective?

Simply because Beckett carries out a profound and radical dismantling of modern narrative, which can only be characterized as deconstructivist. Let us clarify the very term deconstruction since there seems to be a profound misunderstanding of the term. What Derrida implied by it is the following: deconstruction is not a theory, it is not a method, it is a manner of reading, it is a hermeneutic that places itself inside a given form or argument, and by using the very mechanism of that form or argument, brings down the whole system. It means inhabiting the structures from within. And this deconstruction was most significant with Beckett because, after him, neither "narrative" nor "theatre" will be ever the same. It produced the downfall of two and a half thousand years of mimesis.