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'Steady Stream ... Mad Stuff ... Half the Vowels Wrong ...': Water, Waste and Words in Beckett's Plays

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**“STEADY STREAM...MAD STUFF...HALF THE
VOWELS WRONG...”: WATER, WASTE AND WORDS IN
BECKETT’S PLAYS**

In 1937 Samuel Beckett wrote a letter to his friend Axel Kaun in which he used images that relate to water to question his ability to write in his native English. This letter, written in a grammatically imperfect German, has been used to support arguments about Beckett’s turn to writing in French, as well as to identify Beckett as a late—or post-modernist—questioning the value and integrity of language and meaning (see, for example, Begam 37-9, Boulter 19-20, Conner 19, Coughlan 76, Fifield 73-4, McDonald 36). Scholars who have employed the letter for these purposes have relied on Martin Esslin’s translation published in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, a short but important volume edited by Ruby Cohn in 1984. To make their cases, such scholars almost exclusively have cited the following two passages:

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. (171)

To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. (172)

Esslin’s translation, however, is problematic as he changes punctuation, which results in emphasis where it originally was not. Moreover, he erases Beckett’s reading of German 19th-century texts by choosing English rather than German equivalents. In this essay, I will examine the letter, going beyond the two quotes that appear in many critical works on Beckett. Rather than using Esslin’s translation, I will use the translation published in Martha

Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck's impressive volume *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940*. This translation sheds new insight into Beckett's goal as a writer and into his dramatic works. It is in this letter that Beckett expresses his goal to write literary and dramatic texts which violate grammatical and stylistic conventions.

In the letter, Beckett attacks "Grammar and style!" (518). He continues:

To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit¹ or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask. It is to be hoped the time will come, thank God, in some circles it already has, when language is best used where it is most efficiently abused.² Since we cannot dismiss it all at once, at least we do not want to leave anything undone that may contribute to its disrepute. To drill³ one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through—I cannot imagine a higher goal for today's writer. (518)

The image of the "Biedermeier bathing suit" (regrettably translated by Esslin as a "Victorian bathing suit") is crucial to Beckett's attack on grammar and style. Esslin's translation aligns Beckett's attack with colonial values of the British Empire. However, Beckett's attack is that of Germany during 1815 to 1848. The Biedermeier era represented a return to the family which was a response to the political turmoil and ideology of individualism and independence brought on by the French Revolution. More importantly for our discussion, the artistic output during the Biedermeier era was that of "art and craft"—decorative but cheaply made works—which Beckett disdained as is evident in his conversation with the French art critic Georges Duthuit in "Three Dialogues" (145). Writing in official English, for Beckett, is like the political and artistic values of the Biedermeier era; they are

outdated. What is more, Biedermeier bathing suits possibly never existed. No catalogues on the arts and textiles of the era feature the “Biedermeier Badeanzug.” Thus the irrelevance of grammar and style, according to Beckett, is so great that he aligns it with a fictive bathing costume.

In his attack on grammar and style Beckett echoes the modernists, particularly Virginia Woolf’s criticism of the 19th-century author’s concern with detail as noted in her essay “Modern Fiction.” While Woolf does not employ images of or related to water, she criticizes the 19th-century writers, or as she calls them “materialists,” for being “dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour” (2089). This need to dress prose fiction impeccably to create a literature that “takes too much delight in the solidity of... fabric” (2088) echoes Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957) in which Nagg, the crusty old man stuck in an ashbin, tells a joke involving an “Englishman, needing a pair of striped trousers in a hurry for the New Year festivities” (102). Nagg tells his listeners that the tailor botches the job and takes “three months” to finish the trousers that the tailor contends are in better condition than the world. Whereas Woolf claims that with the materialists’ attention to detail “Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worthwhile” (2089), Beckett asserts that “Grammar and style!” is a mask, veiling something or nothing beyond the word.

Moreover, Woolf, who like Beckett admired Russian writers, celebrates literature in which questions arise and in which “life” is depicted “not [as] a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (2089). Woolf and Beckett are seeking a writing that is less strictly defined by conventions. Beckett’s image is one related to and of liquid substances. Not only does he conjure up an image of a bathing costume, but also he calls on writers to “drill” holes in language until “something or nothing, starts seeping through” (518). Beckett’s use of the verb “seeping,” coupled with the image

of someone drilling holes in a surface (514), conveys the slow leaking or oozing of fluid, as water may seep through a hole in a boat. In expressing a desire to damage, or even destroy, language through boring holes into it, Beckett voices the potential risk he is willing to take. The image recalls the dangers of drowning, a key feature in *Riders to the Sea* (1904), written by the Irish playwright John Millington Synge, whose dramatic works Beckett admired (Knowlson, *Damned* 71). Beckett is willing to destroy language and to risk his livelihood as a writer for the sake of producing works that defy conventions. In this way he is like his mentor James Joyce, whose novels *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are radical breaks from the conventions of written English.

In addition to drawing on images related to liquids, Beckett draws on a discussion of music and painting, both of which, Beckett notes, have moved beyond the literary arts. In the paragraph that follows, Beckett asks:

Or is literature alone to be left behind on that old, foul road long ago abandoned by music and painting? Is there something paralytically sacred contained within the unnature of the word that does not belong to the elements of the other arts? Is there any reason why that terrifyingly arbitrary materiality of the word surface should not be dissolved, as for example the sound surface of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is devoured by huge black pauses, so that for pages on end we cannot perceive it as other than a dizzying path of sounds connecting unfathomable chasms of silence? An answer is requested. (518-9)

While music and painting have dissolved their surfaces, he wonders why this is not the case with the random and subjective conventions of language. Beckett's use of the word "dissolved" again draws on images of liquids. To dissolve is to liquefy through thawing, melting, or softening. Beckett ultimately wants language to be fluid.

In this passage, moreover, Beckett questions whether the written word can ever convey silence. Eleven years later, however, he completes *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*)—the first of several performed plays that explore pauses.⁴ Despite achieving this writerly goal, Beckett repeatedly depicts the struggle between sound and silence through the images of water. Specifically, *All That Fall* (1956), *Embers* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and *Not I* (1972) provide viewers with a steady storm—a stream of sound with silence intermixed. In *Not I* Beckett achieves this effect through the character named Mouth who clenches her lips after refusing to say “I” (377, 379, 381, 382), and by opening and closing the play with “*Mouth's voice unintelligible behind curtain*” for roughly ten seconds (376). While Mouth keeps speaking, she essentially makes no sound. In the BBC televised version, the first and last ten seconds show the mouth, which fills the entire television screen, moving as if speaking. No sound is heard, however. In prose texts, Beckett too is successful. I am thinking of Beckett's “*Stirring Still*,” written between 1986-1989, which, in its very title, conveys silence while simultaneously communicating continued unrest.

In expressing his aim to move past words and sound, Beckett writes Kaun about two contemporary writers—James Joyce, who was working on *Finnegans Wake* during the 1930s, and Gertrude Stein. Already here, Beckett defines his goal as distinctly other than Joyce's, although he admired Joyce and valued his writing and friendship. In Joyce's work, he recognizes that “There it seems much more a matter of an apotheosis of the word” (519). In spite of the urge to show the similarities of the writers, I ask that we see this as an early statement of Beckett's breaking away from Joyce's influence. Beckett places himself as Joyce's binary. Although he admires Joyce for his experimentation with language, he does not wish to elevate the “word” to some divine state, as Joyce does. Instead, he wishes to violate words. His focus on violation and abuse is softened in 1956 when he tells Israel Shenker:

The kind of work I do is one in which I'm not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past. (Acheson 6)

While Beckett rejects Joyce's elevation of words, he does not completely break from Joyce. Both use images related to water in their works. Joyce found inspiration in the flow of the Liffey River in his final novel, *Finnegans Wake*, which seems to intellectually frustrate most who read it. Beckett creates a literature of failure when utilizing images that pertain to fluids.

About Stein's logographs, Beckett notes that the "fabric of the language has at least become porous, if regrettably only quite by accident" (519). Beckett's description of Stein's accidentally "porous" language is a return to the image of "seeping." It is a language that has small holes that allow air or fluids to pass through it. The accidental porous nature, for Beckett, is not wholly satisfying. He requires violence—an intentional destruction of language. Nevertheless, here, he seems to value Stein above Joyce. Beckett's own porous texts, such as the excessive ellipses in *Not I*, are assaults on theatrical conventions of monologues. Thus the play allows for silence and doubt to seep through its structure. Beckett draws the letter to its close with a final image of water:

On the road towards this, for me, very desirable literature of the non-word,⁵ some form of nominalistic irony can of course be a necessary phase. However, it does not suffice if the game loses some of its sacred solemnity. Let it cease altogether! Let's do as that crazy mathematician who used to apply a new principle of measurement at each individual step of the calculation. Word-storming in the name of beauty.⁶ (520)

Storms and rain are recurring images in his plays for radio. Whilst Beckett calls for “word-storming,” he informs Kaun that “I am doing nothing” even though he intends to “violate a foreign language as involuntarily as, with knowledge and intention, [he] would like to do against [his] own language” (520). In addition to the sea, lakes and storms, Beckett frequently incorporates images of bodily waste in his dramatic works. What greater violation is there than to urinate on something? Beckett’s characters—Didi in *Waiting for Godot* and Krapp in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, for example—relieve themselves so that the audience is aware of their doing so. What is more, Henry, the protagonist in Beckett’s 1957 radio play *Embers*, concludes with an image of waste when reflecting upon his appointments for the week to come:

Tomorrow...tomorrow...plumber at nine, then nothing. [*Pause. Puzzled.*] Plumber at nine? [*Pause.*] Ah yes, the waste. [*Pause.*] Words. [*Pause.*] Saturday...nothing. Sunday...Sunday... nothing all day. [*Pause.*] Nothing, all day nothing. [*Pause.*] All day all night nothing. [*Pause.*] Not a sound. (264)

With “waste” and “words” separated by a pause and as non sequiturs, words in *Embers* become waste—an important revelation as Henry is a storyteller. Henry’s memories of his wife, his daughter, and his father who drowned in the sea, as well as his story of Bolton and Holloway, are flushed away as waste products. He is left with nothing to say. His pauses and the last declaration of silence leave the listeners at home with only the sound of the “scarcely audible sea” (253).

Starting with *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett breaks from the conventions of radio and stage. His unconventional plays are drastically different from the 19th-century realism of Henrik Ibsen—that gentleman in a Biedermeier bathing suit (if you will) whom Beckett scoffed at. In his October 16, 1972 letter to Alan Schneider, containing directions for the American debut of *Not*

I, Beckett wrote “All I know is in the text. ‘She’ is purely a stage entity, part of a stage image and purveyor of a stage text. The rest is Ibsen” (Fehsenfeld et al., *Letters 1966-1989*, 311). Composed of fragments spoken by a disembodied mouth, *Not I* recalls the life-story of the narrating voice while simultaneously the voice attempts to reject her story. Knowlson has defined her narrative as a form of diarrhea (1979, 200); Mouth recalls rushing to “the nearest lavatory” when the “steady stream...mad stuff...half the vowels wrong” comes pouring out of her mouth (382). This gush may be reimagined as urgent urination. What we see, after all, especially in the BBC televised version, is a mouth that resembles a vagina (Knowlson 200). The first words of the play support this connection:

...out...into this world...this world...tiny little thing...before its time...in a godfor—... what?... girl?...yes...tiny little girl...into this...out into this...before her time...godforsaken hole called... called...no matter...parents unknown... unheard of...he having vanished...thin air...no sooner buttoned up his breeches...she similarly...eight months later... (376)

The opening is undeniably a recollection of her birth and the birth of the story coming from her mouth.

The images of “seeping” and “storming” from the 1937 letter inform Beckett’s *Not I*. Mouth seems out of control in the gush of language that attacks the audience. Despite her inability to control the words, Beckett defines it not as an explosion but as a “steady stream” (382). This stream that comes suddenly is represented as a stream of consciousness in the skill of grammar and style, used unconventionally, but with intention and precision. We hear Mouth’s words; the vowels are correct despite her saying otherwise. In contrast to her “mouth on fire...stream of words...” (380), she has been “practically speechless...all her days” (379). What Beckett creates is a binary that depicts an unstoppable

stream of words which for the audience brings about a seeping of information that ultimately provides us with the compassion we need to keep viewing.

Although Mouth's refusal to "*relinquish third person*" (375) threatens to push away the audience, a second character, who never speaks but whose presence is crucial, draws us back in with his "*gesture of helpless compassion*" (375). Through his gesture, the character astutely named Auditor tells us that it is okay not to comprehend the words. The stream of words is ineffable. The Auditor and Beckett's violence to language reveal that compassion does not need understanding. In other words, it is not the words and meaning that Beckett here wishes to elevate (Joyce's apotheosis), but the compassionate albeit helpless gestures we make when failing to understand—when drowning in words we do not comprehend. As Beckett expressed to Jessica Tandy, the actress who starred in the American debut of *Not I*, "I hope the piece may work on the nerves of the audience, not on its intellect" (Brater 190).

As a young man struggling to be known as an author, Samuel Beckett sought a mode of expression that did not rely on English grammar and style. Beckett strove to violate these conventions using images of water in various forms. In addition to incorporating images of lakes and storms, Beckett drew on images of urination. In drawing on bodies of water and bodily fluids, Beckett created literature out of waste—the sewage of raw emotion.

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Notes

¹ Esslin translates “Biedermeier Badeanzug” as “Victorian bathing suit.”

² Esslin translates “misgebraucht” incorrectly as “misused.”

³ Esslin translates “zu bohren” as “to bore.”

⁴ *Eleutheria* was not published until after Beckett’s death. For full translation and production history, see Stephen Graf, “You Call this ‘Freedom’? The Fight to Publish and Produce Samuel Beckett’s First Full-length Play,” *New England Theatre Journal*, vol. 25 (2014), pp. 71-92.

⁵ Esslin translated “Unworts” as “unword.”

⁶ Esslin translates “Eine Woerterstuermerie im Namen der Schoenheit” as “An assault against words in the name of beauty.” His translation erases the image of a deluge of rain, or the storms that threaten his radio play *All That Fall*.

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