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REACHING OUT TO THE WORLD IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S LATE SHORT STORIES[1]

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ABSTRACT. Although the short story lacks the novel's capacity to construct a broad picture of society and does not offer the possibility of interconnecting different perspectives to act as a chronicle or to draw a wide canvas of the social arena, it remains an apt form for evoking the unsaid and, in doing so, encapsulating the spirit of an age in a few words. By examining Samuel Beckett's late prose pieces, this article aims to assess the potential of the experimental short story as a marker of contemporary times. In this analysis, Beckett is revealed as an unconventional writer who could, nevertheless, capture the mindset of an anxious age. Additionally, Beckett's contribution to the genre of short fiction will be explored.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, the short story, experimental fiction, stylistic austerity, literature and society.

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LA CONEXIÓN CON EL MUNDO EN LOS RELATOS CORTOS TARDÍOS DE SAMUEL BECKETT

RESUMEN. Aunque el relato corto carece de la capacidad de la novela para construir una amplia panorámica de la sociedad ni tampoco ofrece la posibilidad de conectar diferentes perspectivas con el objetivo de realizar una crónica o de trazar las grandes líneas que conforman un escenario global, sí es por el contrario una forma literaria muy adecuada para sugerir y evocar, siendo capaz así de resumir en unas pocas palabras el espíritu de una época. Al examinar las piezas en prosa tardías de Samuel Beckett, este artículo busca examinar el potencial del relato experimental para hacer de indicador de la época contemporánea. En este análisis, se demuestra que Beckett era un escritor atípico que también fue capaz de captar el marco ideológico de una era caracterizada por la ansiedad. De forma adicional, en este trabajo se explora la contribución de Samuel Beckett al género de la ficción breve.

Palabras clave: Samuel Beckett, el relato corto, ficción experimental, austeridad estilística, literatura y sociedad.

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The versatility of the modern short story, in its capacity to adapt itself to the changing nature of society and to capture the ideological environment of a multiform reality in brief snapshots, has been considered an essential part of the genre. It is conventionally accepted that the novel may offer a panoramic composition of society, or even a sweeping view of a particular period in history, with a bigger breadth of perspective than the short story, but the latter may capture the atmospheric quality of a moment in time better than any other literary form: "Short stories imply a larger world beyond the circumscription of the words; there are depths beneath the surfaces" (Beevers 21). As Claire Larriere has noted, the flexibility of form allows the short story to be "a seismograph of our world" (197). Writing at the end of the 20th century, Larriere predicted a brilliant future for short fiction in the ensuing decades, in that the radical transformations that were already afoot in various social spheres would be a natural stimulus for practitioners of the form. Julia Bell and Jackie Gay, the editors of *England Calling* (2001), to name just an example of a contemporary anthology of short fiction, certainly considered the pieces they had collected for their book as "a way of orientating ourselves in new times" (Bell and Gay xi) thus expanding the capacities of the genre in order to understand issues like the identity of a nation.

In this context of expansion, a consideration of the short story in the literary career of Samuel Beckett can serve as a reminder of a different kind of development in the modern short story. Beckett's contribution to the genre, it is well-known, ran against conventions in storytelling:

> Beckett's stories have instead often been treated as anomalous or aberrant, a species so alien to the tradition of short fiction that critics are still struggling to assess not only what they mean – if they 'mean' at all – but what they are: stories or novels, prose or poetry, rejected fragments or completed tales. (Gontarski 40)

The aim of the present study is to explore the alternative evolution that the contemporary short story underwent at the hands of the winner of the 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature and to consider whether the story's capacity to extract meaning from a complex universe remains intact in Beckett's own version of the genre. For this purpose, I will examine his late short fiction through an interpretive reading, focusing on the allusions to episodes of ignominy that pervade recent human history, grounding my analysis in the work of critics and scholars in the field of Beckett Studies. The ultimate objective of this essay is to ascertain whether the short story can be a vehicle in the understanding of our rapidly evolving societies even if it is written against the realistic but evocative style so characteristic of this particular literary art, as described by V. S. Pritchett as a kind of writing that demands "a mingling of the skills of the rapid reporter or traveller with an eye for incident and an ear for real speech, the instincts of the poet and ballad-maker, and the sonnet writer's concealed discipline of form" (xiv). The focus here will be in respect of works that Beckett wrote in his late period, from the 1960s to his death in 1989. These texts were written "at a time when Samuel Beckett was pushing the boundaries of what was possible in both prose and drama and creating radically challenging texts" (Stewart 336). A selection of representative works from this period (*Fizzles*, "All Strange Away", "Imagination Dead Imagine", "Enough", "Ping" and "Lessness") has been chosen with the intention of exploring how he transformed the short story into perhaps the most radical experiment in short fiction ever made. The dating of these stories will refer to the year of their composition, as in some cases their publication only came about several years later. All of them, except, "All Strange Away", were written first in French and subsequently translated into English by the author. The order follows Pim Verhulst's (2015) chronology of Beckett's works.

Since the very beginning, Beckett felt a certain unease with the short story. His first published narrative, "Assumption" (1929), is a brisk, edgy and uncomfortable piece of writing which owes much to the example of James Joyce and the influence of the Surrealists. "Assumption" was conceived as a sophisticated short story, "brimming with suffering and apotheosis and determinedly transcendent sexuality" (Cochram 5). Its exuberant quality reveals a fledgling writer who was keen to leave a mark, but its forced syntax also indicates a young author who did not feel that the parameters of the short story, as then established, were his metier:

> He indeed was not such a man, but his voice was of such a man; and occasionally, when he chanced to be interested in a discussion whose noisy violence would have been proof against most resonant interruption of the beautifully banal kind, he would exercise his remarkable faculty of whispering the turmoil down. (Beckett, *The Complete* 3)

Indeed, a short time later Beckett channeled his energies into the writing of an experimental novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written in 1932, published posthumously) which was rejected by various publishers due to its disjointed nature. Beckett returned to short fiction with the collection *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934), with two of the short stories therein rescued from his unpublished novel. All the stories in this collection center on the sentimental affairs of the main character, Belacqua, a peculiar young man clearly maladjusted to the demands that society places on him. The narratives are clever and sharply written, but a sense of urgency dominates, as if the author were anxious to move on from this phase in his career. When reading these pieces, the sense of witnessing a writer struggling to find a voice is a recurrent feature: "In *More Pricks than Kicks*, Belacqua is aware of the nothingness, but he has not yet found the language to express it" (Ingham 145). This aspect of Beckett's art is worth examining in detail: early in his career he was searching for a formula, an approach to writing that would reveal literature's inner mechanisms, determined as he was to find a means of using language that would crack open the empty ornateness of literary discourse. On at least two occasions in the 1930s he expressed his desire to achieve this goal as a writer. First, in the previously mentioned novel, *Dream…*, when the narrator longs for a kind of reading which would be activated by what lies hidden between the lines: "The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement" (Beckett, *Dream* 137). And second, in the form of a reflection in a letter to his friend Axel Kaun (in the so-called "German Letter" of 1937): "Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved … so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence?" (Beckett, *Disjecta* 172). The kind of writing he was advocating would exhibit the fragments of meaning in a literary text as pieces to be assembled by the reader; but, as Heather Ingham suggests, Beckett at the time lacked the skills to write a literary work in such a deconstructive way. Only thirty years later, after a long process of stripping literature to the core, would he be ready to embark on such an endeavor.

Beckett's lack of engagement with the short story in his early period can be explained in part by his personal circumstances. For an ambitious young man, the short story might not have offered an easy path to success: "The young Beckett … did not think the short story as a mode in which much distinction (with very honorable exceptions) could be achieved, or one in which a writer could expect, or should seek, to achieve much distinction" (Pilling, *More Pricks* 9). At the same time, perhaps Beckett felt that the form had already reached the greatest artistic heights that it could, and thus it was not worthwhile seeking to emulate the "honorable exceptions" of the 1920s who had pushed the short form to such levels of excellence. We might bear in mind that Beckett spent "his formative years as a writer witnessing the twilight years of the movement that will determine his literary career" (Sheehan 139), and that the short story was then at the center of the avant-garde: "The short story had become … a focus for modernist experimentation, a fixture of high-culture publishing venues and the subject of a growing body of aesthetic theory" (Hunter 44).

The open-endedness of the form in its most highly-wrought emanation, its allusive quality, and its textual difficulty must surely have been appreciated by the young writer. Equally, he might have sensed that there was no point going in the same stylistic direction, in which there perhaps seemed to be no potential for innovation or further development. Many years later, when he did come to devote his energies to the writing of short fiction, it is significant that he was keen to strip away the status that the genre had previously attained, as if he wanted to distance himself clearly from even the best examples in the field. By calling his pieces texts, prose pieces or, more poignantly, "fizzles" or "residua", he was thus indicating a rupture with the high art associated with the modernist short story. His approach allowed for tinkering with the form, removing some of its constituent parts, and hence exposing it to new light and perspectives. The pressure of tradition and the expectations associated with the genre were thus removed, and as a result the material became more malleable. By avoiding the term "short story", Beckett could focus on creating "texts which only just manage to exist" (Eagleton 2). Yet the characteristics of the modernist short story would not be fully rejected by Beckett in his late short stories; it could be argued, rather, that he simply developed these features to their fullest potential.

Returning to Beckett's evolution as a writer, after the Second World War, when he wrote major works such as *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and the trilogy of *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951) and *The Unnamable* (1953), he did not abandon the short story, but in fact began to do new things with it. The *nouvelles* of 1946, *The Expelled*, *The Calmant*, *The End* and *First Love*, are all vehicles for the expression of his obsession with the impossibility of communication, the isolation of the individual consciousness, and the assuaging power of fiction. But soon after he wrote the *Texts for Nothing* (1951), a significant breakthrough in his career. What happened was that he ended up inhabiting the realm of disintegration that he had pursued in his prose. For the first time in his short fiction, these 13 pieces represent his abandoning of any attempt towards a meaningful plot, reliable characters or a coherent background for the action. Instead, the written word finds itself, so to speak, in a narrative of a highly introspective nature. What he wrote after *Texts for Nothing* will form the focus of the present study, "the agonizing brief texts of the 1960s and 1970s, scraps and fizzles of narrative, flickering on the very edge of nonexistence" (Boxall 34).

The reduction of literature to its essential elements was part of a project that was not restricted to short fiction; Beckett at this time produced formalist plays for the theatre and even TV, works characterized by the dehumanization of bodies and by the "formal patterning of all elements of the *mise en scene*: delivery of the voice, movement, gesture, spoken text, space, light and sound" (McMullan 105). The short prose that he wrote during this period had the additional feature of exhibiting a provisional quality, "texts which no sooner begun ended in abandonment, or were discarded after a long struggle to find the path to a satisfactory conclusion" (Nixon vii).

His new approach to short fiction was clearly evident in the texts known as *Fizzles* (or *Foriades* in French), published in English in 1976 but written over the previous two decades. The collection originally consisted of 6 pieces ("He is barehead", "Horn came always", "Afar a bird", "I gave up before birth", "Closed place", "Old earth"). Two further texts ("For to end yet again" and "Still") were added later. These pieces have little in common, apart from being devoid of plot, identifiable characters, or any sense of closure. In line with the author's intention of dismantling the short story, the landscape is equally barren. (Characteristically, the *fizzle* known as "Afar a bird" begins with "Ruinstrewn land"). The protagonists are solitary individuals who, in some cases, maintain a relationship of sorts with another character, but who largely exist within their own consciousness. To complicate things further, there is no fixed structure in the collection, and this reinforces the idea that Beckett was acting against the convention of the short story: the pieces were published separately at various times and the editors who subsequently collected them chose a different positioning in each case: "*Fizzles/Foriades* is considered by Beckett himself as being a work with a modular structure since each story can be arranged in different, endless orders" (Zaccaria 106).

More than merely writing short stories, it seems that Beckett was toying with an idea, perhaps creating a skeletal design with very few spatio-temporal parameters in order to see where it might take him. For example, in *Fizzle 1*, "He is barehead", an unnamed character walks endlessly and silently in a zigzag through a labyrinth-like structure. This whole journey takes place in darkness, and thus he bumps against the walls at every turn and frequently hurts himself. His progress is upwards, although there does not seem to be a final destination. The danger of falling off a cliff or precipice is disturbingly present: "The only sounds, apart from those of the body on its way, are of fall, a great drop dropping at last from a great height and bursting, a solid mass that leaves its place and crashes down, lighter particles collapsing slowly" (Beckett, *The Complete* 226). The story, like the other pieces in *Fizzles*, is conveyed through an obsessive impulse, with repetitions abounding. Although it is possible to apply an interpretation (the journey as the metaphor par excellence of the course of life), the very fabric of the text – difficult, intricate, opaque – acts against its reading as a fable.

Another remarkable feature of the prose that he wrote during this period is that these texts are not reader-friendly; there is no attempt by the author to pave the way for an easy transit. Let us consider in this sense the opening sentences of *Fizzle 5*, "Closed place": "Closed place. All needed to be known for say is known. There is nothing but what is said. Beyond what is said there is nothing. What goes on in the arena is not said. Did it need to be known it would be. No interest. Not for imagining" (Beckett, *The Complete* 236). Even the most willful and unflinching of readers is likely to be put off by the narrator's warning that what follows is not worth the effort of reading. The result, as in other stories in the collection, is a prose text that foregrounds its own impossibility as a story: "Beckett produces a short prose fiction in which everything is potentially meaningful, but which rebuffs the reader's desire for interpretation, so that it also appears to be devoid of significance"

(March-Russell 219). As David Houston Jones has observed, there is a stark contradiction in the fact that the particular place referred to in the opening lines of the story is also the subject of the text itself (80).

The impossibility of ascribing a single interpretation to these texts does not mean that echoes and allusions are a foreclosed matter; in fact, Beckett's short fiction of the late period is heavy with resonances which transport the reader to episodes in history or to other literary works. Marjorie Perloff has linked the enigmatic space described in "Closed place" (a vast arena crammed with bodies and surrounded by a ditch) to the concentration camps and crematoria of the Second World War, but she also finds an evocation of Dante's *Inferno* in *The Divine Comedy* (Perloff 205). Once more we can sense a powerful ambivalence here: the search for interpretation is forcefully discouraged, but the texts are nevertheless nurtured by a complex web of allusions.

The piece known as "All Strange Away" (1964), shows Beckett solidly immersed in the framework of stylistic austerity and conceptual complexity that had been prefigured in *Fizzles*. From the very beginning here, the hackneyed gimmick of conventional storytelling is rejected: "Imagination dead imagine. A place, that again. Never another question. A place, then someone in it, that again. Crawl out of the frowsy deathbed and drag it to a place to die in. Out of the door and down the road in the old hat and coat like after the war, no, not that again" (Beckett, *The Complete* 169). The author sets himself to the task of telling a story with no recourse to the imagination and with the minimum elements required to say something meaningful. With "All Strange Away" Beckett inaugurates a series of texts that describe single individuals or couples locked in reduced spaces such as empty rooms, cubicles or rotundas, a kind of setting that will be recurrent in subsequent narratives. Following Derrida, Jonathan Boulter suggests reading the settings of Beckett's late fictions as spaces of mourning, calling these sites "post-catastrophic spaces" (97).

The plot of "All Strange Away" is reduced to a man sitting in a small, square room which is lit from all sides, although the light alternates with complete darkness. Similarly, the temperature in the room fluctuates between hot and cold. The male figure envisages a past life with a female companion, Emma, whose image appears on the walls. At the same time, as if realizing that he is breaking the rules of textual-narrative austerity expressed at the beginning (and indeed in the title itself), the narrator thwarts any attempt to recreate moments from the past: "Imagine lifetime, gems, evenings with Emma and the flights by night, no, not that again" (Beckett, *The Complete* 171). Meanwhile, the cube-like room reduces in dimensions and changes shape, becoming a small rotunda. The main character is now transformed into Emma herself, who is subjected to the same changes of position that the man had previously undergone, these postures expressed in crudely geometrical formulations. The rationale behind such a difficult narratorial exercise is to construct a story with pure observable facts. Memories, hopes, former knowledge and desires are reduced to the category of murmurs, and thus are easily discharged. What remains is a bleak glimpse of human existence, life as merely a matter of being in space. As Natalie Leeder has argued, "Beckett plumbs the depths of absolute

immanence and, in doing so, exposes its horror" (Leeder 133). The sobriety of the story's setting and plan is conveyed in a language that is "minimal, estranged, sparse yet suggestive" (Nixon xiii). As is frequently the case in other texts from this period, the minimal plot is eclipsed by the contradictory formulation of the central idea: "the drive towards immanence is also interrupted throughout by moments of resistance" (Leeder 140). The very exercise of imagining a story without using the imagination (accompanied by the negative reaction within the text itself, when the narrator deviates from the initial premise) becomes the true essence of the piece. Beckett's late work, in this case, becomes "a constantly reiterated strategy against content" (Renton 170).

The radical approach to storytelling initiated by Beckett in "All Strange Away" still had to be perfected; it was too unwieldy to constitute an exemplary piece of self-reduction in writing, in that it was presented in an "intransigently experimental manner" (Knowlson and Pilling 136). The piece he wrote after this arises from the same linguistic scaffolding and perfectly encapsulates the ideas about pure fiction that Beckett was envisaging at this time. "Imagination Dead Imagine" (1965) contains a series of familiar elements: a rotunda, individuals in geometrically defined positions (this time two figures lying on the floor, like two fetuses in the womb, each one in their own semicircle), glaring illumination from all sides, the alternation of light and dark, cold and heat. As in the previous case, the argument is anticipated in simple terms, and consists of imagining a story without using any inventiveness: "No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine. Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit" (Beckett, *The Complete* 182). The two individuals are immobile on the floor, but not dead, as if the author were conceiving humanity at the final stages of extinction. Apart from the variations in light and temperature, little else is said (or can be said) in a text based on the quest for pure materiality. As in "All Strange Away", the motive for the narration lies in the very act of recreating the scene. More than in any other text by Beckett, "Imagination Dead Imagine" becomes an exploration of the foundations of storytelling: "The focus shifts gradually from the maintenance of a residual plot to an ever more intense examination of the conditions that allow for narrative to come about" (Boxall 39). Despite its brevity and concision, the text is not devoid of reflections on the human condition. The exposure of the bodies to light, their exasperating immobility, together with their precise positioning on the floor, point to a lack of privacy, the annulation of singularity, the curtailment of personal freedom, and the overpowering control of individuals by some unnamed power: "Sweat and mirror notwithstanding they might well pass for inanimate but for the left eyes which at incalculable intervals suddenly open wide and gaze in unblinking exposure long beyond what is humanly possible" (Beckett, *The Complete* 184). The basic description of the rotunda, which could equally refer to a prehistoric burial site or some space-age cubicle, also suggests that these are traits that humankind has suffered throughout history. In their own way, his texts thus offer perceptive insights into general concerns: "Beckett's opacity is also curiously transparent … insofar as it 'fizzles' with its own exhilarated sense of dying" (March-Russell 219).

The brusque oscillation of light and darkness, and of heat and cold, brings to mind the picture of modern atrocities, sudden chemical reactions in the atmosphere produced by nuclear bombs or aerial warfare. The use of torture, silent detention, and illegal methods of interrogation of prisoners also find a resonance here. No explanation can be offered as to why these individuals are here and what the precise circumstances of their confinement are, yet it is evident that we are in the presence of human beings worn down by history, by suffering, by the ignominies of violence and extenuation. The persons described in "Imagination Dead Imagine" are deprived of their agency and appear as dormant and passive, enduring changes of light and temperature as some kind of punishment. Accordingly, their bodies, which lie helplessly on the floor, are described with no remarkable features; they are human specimens at the end of their tether, naked, eroded, worn out, exhausted, indeed almost dead: "It is clear however, from a thousand little signs too long to imagine, that they are not sleeping. Only murmur ah, no more, in this silence, and at the same instant for the eye of prey the infinitesimal shudder instantaneously suppressed" (Beckett, *The Complete* 185). Nothing is revealed, nothing is explained, and it is the reader who has to create their own interpretation; the interaction (and even struggle) with the text is an essential part of the reading experience, and in this sense Beckett's late stories demand the textual practices common to modernist literature: "Critical decoding of modernist texts brings their repressed contents to the surface, revealing the hidden 'political unconscious' of the age by giving testimony to a history of suffering increasingly inaccessible to direct representation" (Miller 31).

"Enough" (1965) is one of the rare stories from this period in Beckett's production in which the relationship between two characters is explored. Answering a question to John Fletcher a few years after the composition of the piece, Beckett himself admitted the strange quality of this text: "*Assez* [its title in French] is out of place in the series and I don't [know] what came over me" (Beckett, *Letters* 205). The story is told in the first person, with the protagonist remembering her past life in the company of a far older man, a silent and furtive tramp. In her recollection, they spent 10 years together, since the man took her under his charge when she was a small girl. They lived a life of nomads, wandering around in the fields without a clear destination: "His talk was seldom of geodesy. But we must have covered several times the equivalent of the terrestrial equator. At an average speed of roughly three miles per day at night. We took flight in arithmetic" (Beckett, *The Complete* 188). Their relationship was based on her dependence on him. She complied with his wishes, including sexual intimacy: "I did all he desired. I desired it too. For him. Whenever he desired something so did I. He only had to say what thing" (Beckett, *The Complete* 186). With the passing of time the old man became more and more decrepit and in the end he told his companion to leave him, something that she did without questioning the order.

The key to an interpretation of this story lies in the ambivalence of the narrator, as the reader does not really get to know her gender until the very last sentence: "Enough my old breasts feel his old hand" (Beckett, *The Complete* 186). Until that moment, the author takes pains to avoid any reference to her sexual identity.

According to Martin Esslin, the search for the other in Beckett transcends the mere accident of gender. However, the longing for companionship, warmth and fulfillment goes hand in hand with the realization of its impossibility, with the result that in all cases couples split up and the ideal union with the other is incomplete. What remains is nostalgia for the love that did not flourish:

> That is the basic paradox of Beckett's universe: that the sublime moments of mystical (almost, but never quite, achieved) insight spring from the 'soul', that mysterious entity … which by some gigantic practical joke of nature is linked to and carried by that grotesque and sordid apparatus of skins and mucous membranes, the human body. (Esslin 1990, 67)

A similar kind of ambivalence affects the telling of the story: "the tone of the work oscillates so strongly and unpredictably between the emotional and the dry, the puzzled and the confident, the informative and the arcane" (Knowlson and Pilling 154). Even the title points to the ambiguity of human relationships: the narrator either had enough of the man's love and wanted no more of it, or she had the exact amount that she needed, the precise quantity of affection required to survive.

"Ping" (1966) is another relevant example of Beckett's radical transformation of the short story. This brief text, barely 4 pages long, contains all the elements that characterize his short prose in the late period. As in similar texts by the author, "it possesses … a strangeness and opaqueness that prevent it … for ever being perfectly apprehensible" (Knowlson and Pilling 170). An individual is in a white room. The blue of his eyes is the only variation of color in the secluded space. His legs are joined together and his arms hang down. All is quiet except for a noise – "ping" – which interrupts the discourse. It is not clear if it is part of the description of the room or if it is an element in the fabric of the text. The reason or purpose for the man's presence in the room is not explained. In fact, there is the possibility that he is accompanied by someone in this small space: "Ping perhaps not alone one second with image same time a little less dim eye black and white half closed long lashes imploring that much memory almost never" (Beckett, *The Complete* 195). The syntax is marked notably by the repetition of words and even phrases: "Some hundred words are permuted and combined into a thousand about the still white figure that is barely visible in its still white surround" (Cohn 299). The way in which this story is written itself offers multiple interpretations. What we know for certain is that an individual, perhaps in his last moments of consciousness and locked in a white room, makes repeated and unsuccessful attempts to imagine something or to recover certain memories from the past: "Ping murmur perhaps a nature one second almost never that much memory almost never" (Beckett, *The Complete* 194). The effort of clarification is transferred to the reader, who "is tantalized by images or traces that seem to offer hope of a coherent interpretation" (Stewart 337). The presence of the word "ping", which occurs randomly throughout the text, prevents a fluent discourse or a continuous reading and causes deep discomfort in the reader. David Lodge was among the first to address this text, noting its extreme characteristics: "It is extraordinarily difficult to read through the

entire piece, short as it is, with sustained concentration. After about forty or fifty lines the words begin to slide and blur before the eyes, and to echo bewilderingly in the ear" (Lodge 86). The consequences, according to Lodge, are clearly and uncomfortably experienced: "On the level of connotation, *ping* is a feeble, pathetic, unresonant, irritating, even maddening sound, making it an appropriate enough title for this piece, which it punctuates like the striking of a triangle at intervals in the course of a complicated fugue" (Lodge 87). The repetition of "ping" is intriguing, naturally, but to ask about its meaning would be the wrong question; it is the effect that it produces that counts. It does not really matter if it is "some type of time marker or bell" (Brienza 168) which is heard by the individual inside the room as an external sound, or whether it is simply an annoying distraction introduced by the author for the discomfort of the reader. Whatever it is, the repeated sound lends the text the edginess of a technological age and it resonates with the stressful experience of modern life, pointing to the difficulty in concentrating, the invasion of noise in our private lives, and the impossibility to finding calm and quiet. It also speaks of our gradually shorter attention spans. The whole text is redolent of an urgent, hectic age which, paradoxically, has lost a motivating force to push forward: "If Beckett's works seem particularly articulate about the historical conditions of the late twentieth century, then it is perhaps because they give the most eloquent testimony to this evacuation of the categories that have driven political and cultural life through the history of modernity" (Boxall 44).

The cloistered individuals in stories such as "All Strange Away", "Imagination Dead Imagine" and "Ping" find a kind of indirect liberation in the piece "Lessness" (1969). The protagonist in the latter appears in the middle of a vast expanse of land: "All sides endlessness earth sky as one no sound no stir" (Beckett, *The Complete* 197). The four walls of a previous enclosure are part of a prior time; the main figure now finds that these walls have been brought down, and he experiences the new situation of being in an open space with broad horizons: "Four square all light sheer white blank planes all gone from mind" (Beckett, *The Complete* 197). The human figure that presides over this narrative, however, has not changed in his terms of physical appearance from those in the other stories. The same worn out, constrained features are in evidence: "Little body grey face features crack and little holes two pale blue" (Beckett, *The Complete* 197). His imagination is still active, but the desire to console himself with sweet memories from the past is equally frustrated: "Old love new love as in the blessed days unhappiness will reign again" (Beckett, *The Complete* 198). The liberation that has been achieved by being free of the enclosure of previous narrations does not seem, on close inspection, anything resembling real freedom: "ruins" is one of the most repeated words in the text, indicating both a physical and mental landscape. If the individual in the story expected to find some sort of refuge or release, it is in fact the upturned walls of the room that he finds, and toil seems once again the only option: "One step more one alone in the sand no hold he will make it" (Beckett, *The Complete* 198). The background vaguely recreates the atmosphere of the end of civilization, a scenario in which perhaps a survivor stumbles towards an uncertain future.

As is common in the stories of this period, the need to recover happy memories of the past is constant, but at the same time is short-lived and bitter: "Never but silence such that in imagination this wild laughter these cries" (Beckett, *The Complete* 199). The pleasure of having been in contact with beauty in the past serves as a melancholic reminder of the fleeting nature of existence. Only in these moments does language seem to become brighter: "Never but imagined the blue in a wild imagining the blue celeste of poesy" (Beckett, *The Complete* 199). If we consider this story as a continuation of "Imagination Dead Imagine" and "Ping", it can be seen as offering little in terms of thematic variation, despite changes in the external environment described.

What makes "Lessness" remarkable in the collection of these short texts is the way it is constructed. Beckett famously wrote 60 different sentences, each on a separate piece of paper. He arranged these papers randomly and constructed the first part of the story in this way. He then repeated the process and added the second half using a different random arrangement of the same 60 sentences. The rationale behind this process was to allow chance to be operative in the creation of a literary work; by repeating the sentences of the first part in a different order, he was able to make "an unending, unendable text" (Renton 174). For the purposes of the present analysis, what is significant is that in "Lessness" statements about the human condition are still presented in the most experimental of his short pieces. The way the story is constructed may indicate a relentless pursuit of meaning, order and coherence, even when there is nothing to substantiate this quest: "The text circles in upon itself via repeated motifs randomly generated and distributed as if words had a life of their own. This is a way of 'going on' whilst 'not being there'" (Pilling, "On not being" 24-25). Ruby Cohn notes a similar idea when she considers the issue of the prevailing rootlessness that conditions the narrative: "the truest refuge is the collapse of refuge" (305).

As I have tried to show through the examples described above, the short story in Beckett's hands becomes the perfect vehicle for literary experimentation. He holds ambiguity and disconnectedness to be unavoidable features of his texts, while at the same time these short works maintain the capacity to frame the mindset of an anxious age. The radical decontextualization that characterize such late pieces reveals the plight of alienated individuals as much as any cutting-edge contemporary short story rooted in a strong sense of place. Written before the technological revolution at the turn of the twenty-first century, Beckett's short fictions already prophesized the desolate state of what has been called the Anthropocene, showing the way that literature could approach a confounding and damaged milieu that does not lend itself to be fully comprehended.

We might add, though, that there is no intention in these or indeed any other texts by Beckett to directly chronicle the anxieties of our time or to offer any kind of guidance as to how to proceed given the threats of a hostile age. In his writing there is no denunciation, no arising awareness, and no revelation. If there is any sense of solace, it comes precisely from his brutal honesty. The impossibility of clear expression goes hand in hand with the need to express, and from this contradiction

a body of written matter emerges. Using the imperfect medium of words, and being aware of the limitations of literature to offer a coherent response to what surrounds us, Beckett explores the state of perplexity that, for him, is the only coherent response to the question of existence. A sharp sense of fragility is perhaps what most pointedly transpires when reading the short prose from his mature period: "These are works that are fundamentally *in progress*; as such, they are provisional and even fragmentary: not unfinished per se, but unfinishable" (Leeder 131). For those who dare to confront them, Beckett's texts have the power to impinge on the reader's consciousness in ways that no other kind of writing does.

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