STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXIII, 4, 2018, p. 151 - 162
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2018.4.12

SAMUEL BECKETT AND MONOLOGUE DRAMA: PERFORMING THE SELF

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ABSTRACT. ***Samuel Beckett and Monologue Drama: Performing the Self***. The paper discusses four of Samuel Beckett's monologue plays "Krapp's Last Tape" (1958), "Play" (1964), "Breath" (1969), "Not I" (1972) and "A Piece of Monologue" (1979), with the purpose of delineating their structure and understanding the playwright's experimental usage of this artistic genre, as well as its role within his overall dramatic corpus. We will attempt a historical and analytical foray into the many uses of the concept of *monologue* in both literature and theatre, with the intention to clarify its various appropriations in these fields and with the hope of eliciting further research into this important topic of analysis.

Keywords*: Samuel Beckett, dramatic monologue, monologue drama, fractured discourse, performance.*

REZUMAT. ***Samuel Beckett şi monologul teatral: Performarea sinelui***. Lucrarea discută monologurile teatrale ale lui Samuel Beckett, "Ultima bandă a lui Krapp" (1958), "Joc" (1964), "Respiraţie" (1969), "Nu eu" (1972) şi "Un fragment de monolog" (1979), cu scopul de a le delimita structura, modul unic prin care dramaturgul înţelege să se raporteze la acest gen dramatic, precum şi rolul lor în ansamblul operei lui Beckett. Speranţa noastră este ca aceast demers de cercetare a monologului, aşa cum e înţeles în literatură şi teatru, va reuşi să stimuleze cercetări ulterioare asupra acestui subiect de analiză.

Cuvinte cheie: *Samuel Beckett, monolog dramatic, drama monologată, discurs fracturat, performance.*

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On the (dramatic) monologue

Indeed, the parentheses seem necessary, albeit a bit puzzling, because, at a first glance at least, both the definition and the use of the concept would appear to be devoid of ambiguity: "All monologues are dramatic. A single person speaking is always addressing that speech to someone, even if only to himself or herself." (Hurley and O'Neill 2012, 167) Why then, one might ask, the need to add the adjective "dramatic" to an art form that pertains primarily to the field of Theatre and Performance Arts, in other words, to a form that is dramatic at its core, theatrical before anything else?

Critics attempted to answer the above question and shed light on the concept by distinguishing between the *dramatic monologue* and the theatre-specific *theatrical monologue*. The former is described as "a type of dramatic experimentation, but not something intended for theatrical presentation" (Stagg 1969, 49), a poetic form to be found in genres other than drama (primarily in poetry, but also in prose, most often as *interior monologue*). The latter, the *theatrical monologue*, is defined as "a speech by a character to himself", different from the *dialogue* "in the lack of verbal exchange and in that it is of substantial length and can be taken out of the context of conflict and dialogue" (Pavis 1998, 218). The boundaries between the two concepts, however, are still unclear and fluid.

The dramatic monologue is understood as a literary form *par excellence* and it originates in late 19th century Britain, in the poetic works of Victorian poets Robert Browning (1812-1889), his poem "My Last Duchess" (1842) being often quoted as an example, and Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892), especially the poem "Ulysses" (1833), "as a reaction against confessional style" (Langbaum 1963, 79). Even though this poetic form predates Browning[2], he nevertheless brought this art form to "a high level" (Stagg 1969, 49) and "survives as a major Victorian poet for the dramatic monologues" (Jones 1967, 315). It was later adopted and enriched by modernist poets such as Ezra Pound (1895-1972), W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) and, most notably, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), who "contributed more to the development of the form than any other poet since Browning. Certainly "Prufrock", "Portrait of a Lady", "Gerontion", "Journey of the Magi", "A Song for Simeon" and "Marina" do "as much credit to the dramatic monologue as anything of Browning's" (Langbaum 1963, 77). In the second half of the 20th century, through the poetic works of Richard Howard (b. 1929), James Schevill (1920-2009), Edwin Morgan (1920-2010) or Carol Ann Duffy (b. 1955) "the dramatic monologue was again taken up with innovative enthusiasm" (Hurley and O'Neill 2012, 182).

[2] See, for instance, Howard, Claud. 1910. "The Dramatic Monologue: Its Origin and Development". *Studies in Philology* 4, 31-88.

The definition of the monologue as understood by theatre practitioners is, perhaps, even more shrouded in uncertainty, and despite its apparent unambivalence – "The monologue is a form of theatrical discourse which implies the absence of a conversational partner, of the 'stage interlocutor', with the audience being the only receiver." (Ubersfeld 1999, 53, my translation) – there are still numerous unclear aspects, the concept remaining "an incredibly widespread mode spanning 'conventional' drama to 'alternative' theatre" and "soliciting questions about the very nature of theatre itself, about the nature of performance and audience response, truth and illusion, narrative and experience" (Wallace 2006, 2).

Its use in plays and performances is as old as theatre itself, assuming, over the years, various forms, either as *soliloquies* (in Greek, as well as in Shakespearian tragedies), brief *solo asides* (in comedies) or longer *interior monologue* asides (in drama), however, it is not until the second half of the 20th century that the *monologue drama* emerges as an autonomous theatrical form, "as a *genre*" and not merely as a "*dramatic device*" (Wallace 2006, 4), with the figure of Samuel Beckett at its core:

> Beyond that there is a vague sense that for drama at least, all roads probably lead back to Samuel Beckett. Beckett is indisputably pivotal. While early examples of monologue plays include August Strindberg's "The Stronger" (1888-9), and Eugene O'Neill's "Before Breakfast" (1916), it is not until Beckett begins to explore the form in the late 1950s that its experimental potential is seriously developed. (Wallace 2006, 2-3)

Specialists attempting to delineate the structure of monologue drama and to advance an unequivocal definition of the concept, with scientific interest on this relatively new subject being "diffuse and scant" (Wallace 2006, 2) unavoidably feel compelled to resort to analytical studies on the established poetic forms (the interior monologue, the dramatic monologue), "which can be seen to suggest some of the principal trajectories in contemporary monologue drama and performance" (Wallace 2006, 13). The evident disparities between *dramatic monologue* and *monologue drama* notwithstanding, concerning, first and foremost, their intention, it is generally accepted that, in essence, all monologues are characterised by three main attributes, *speaker*, *audience*, *occasion*, respectively:

> The monologue, as Browning has exemplified it, is one end of a conversation. A definite speaker is conceived in a definite, dramatic situation. Usually we find also a well-defined listener, though his character is understood entirely from the impression he produces upon the speaker. We feel that this listener has said something and that his presence and

> character influence the speaker's thoughts, words, and manner. The conversation does not consist of abstract remarks, but takes place in a definite situation as a part of human life (Curry 1908, 7).

Later researchers further nuanced Curry's structure, with Ina Beth Sessions, for instance, considering the three elements to be typical of a "formal monologue" and adding four more features, "revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present" (1947, 508), as distinctive marks of the "perfect monologue" (see table below).

Sub-classification of the Dramatic Monologue *Approximations*			
Perfect 1) Speaker 2) Audience 3) Occasion 4)Interplay between speaker and audience 5)Revelation of character 6)Dramatic action 7)Action taking place in the present.	*Imperfect* 1) Shifting of center of interest from speaker; or, 2) Fading into indefiniteness of one or more of the last six Perfect characteristics.	*Formal* 1) Speaker 2)Audience 3) Occasion	*Approximate* 1) Speaker 2) Lacking one or more of the characteristics listed under the Formal or the Imperfect.

Figure 1. Ina Beth Sessions' categorisation of dramatic monologues (1947).

More recent studies on the nature of the theatrical monologue also acknowledge the fundamental tripartite structure of the monologic discourse, emphasising their strong interconnectivity. *Speaker* and *audience* engage, on a clearly circumscribed occasion, in interactions, either obvious or implicit. As such, monologues are never "far removed from dialogism" (Ubersfeld 1999, 53, *our trans.*), and in fact, the implied receiver (reader or spectator) is an active component of the overall configuration of the monologue:

> However monological the utterance may be (for example, a scientific or philosophical treatise), however much it may concentrate on its own object, it cannot but be, in some measure, a response to what has already been said about the given topic, on the given issue, even though this responsiveness may not have assumed a clear-cut external expression. It will be manifested in the overtones of the style, in the finest nuances of the composition. The utterance is filled with *dialogic overtones*, and they must be taken into account in order to understand fully the style of the utterance. After all, our thought itself – philosophical, scientific, and

> artistic – is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well." (Bakhtin 2010, 92)

In this form of interaction lie "both the strength and the improbability and weakness of the monologue" states Patrice Pavis (1998, 218), who differentiates in terms of "dramaturgical function" between *technical monologues (narratives)*, "a character's version of events that are past or cannot be shown directly", *lyrical monologues*, "a moment of reflection and emotion in a character who gives away confidences," and *monologues of reflection or decision*, "given a difficult choice, the character outlines to himself the pros and cons of a certain course of behavior," while at the same time defining, in his classification of monologues "by literary form", *monologue drama* (he calls it *play as monologue*) as "a play that has a single character […] or is made up of a series of very long speeches" (1998, 218).

These brief theoretical considerations on the structure and theatrical function of the monologue will represent the framework for our analysis of the dramatic works of Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) and will permit us to better illustrate the innovative style of his monologue dramas.

Samuel Beckett and the play with monologue drama

Samuel Beckett's undeniable contributions to modern literature and theatre took many forms and are, as indeed all masterpieces, susceptible to a multitude of interpretations, a strong evidence for their multilayered structure. The present study however, will focus exclusively on Beckett's experimentation with the monologue drama artistic form, in continuation of the "earlier developments in the monologue tradition, revising the work of both Victorian and modernist predecessors" (Riquelme 2014, 401). We will thus examine the structure and use of the monologue as manifest in the plays "Krapp's Last Tape" (1958), "Play" (1964), "Breath" (1969), "Not I" (1972) and "A Piece of Monologue" (1979), in "his representations of a dramatic monologue beyond the unity of interior monologue, beyond the coherence of ego and character" (Ackerley 2004, 40).

"A late evening in the future" (Beckett 2012, 259) is the first stage direction of "Krapp's Last Tape", from the very beginning both destabilising any pre-existing implicit *dialogic* relation world-character and dismantling any chance for a "perfect" monologue. In the future therefore, in his "den", Krapp, "white face. purple nose. disordered grey hair. unshaven" (2012, 259), is the character present on stage, sitting at his table and listening to a recording of his younger self. Throughout the play, the emphasis is on the *voice* and, implicitly,

on the *discourse*, as Krapp, now 69 years old, listens and critically reacts to a recording of his thirty-nine-year-old self: "Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that" (2012, 269). In its turn, the voice of 39-year-old Krapp critically comments and distances itself from the discourse of a still younger Krapp, "from at least ten or twelve years ago" (2012, 264), dismissing its point of view, style and tone: "Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! [*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins*] And the resolutions! [*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins*] (…) False ring here. [*Pause.*] Shadows of the opus… magnum" (2012, 265).

The continuous relationship Krapp-Tape from this experimental monologue drama parallels Umberto Eco's understanding of Author and (Model) Reader as "textual strategies" and his delineations of the Author-Text-Reader interconnections where "sender and the addressee are present in the text not as mentioned poles of the utterance, but as 'actantial roles' of the sentence" and "the Model Reader is a textually established set of felicity conditions (…) to be met in order to have a macrospeech act (such as a text is) fully actualized" (Eco 1981, 10-11). It is only within the fictional construct, within the recording, that these implied "model" selves, Krapp recording and the future Krapp listening, can engage in dialogue.

In a form of *reverse monologue*, or reverse relationship, Beckett constructs Krapp as a materialisation of the implied, "model" listener of his younger selves. He is *the last* addressee creating a *last* tape (a work of fiction in its turn), sender and receiver all in one. The play abounds in evidence in support of this claim. The selection the character operates before settling on which tape to listen to resembles every reader's attempt to select a book from a shelf, perusing through titles and trying to deduce from them alone what the works might be about:

> Ah! [*He peers at ledger, reads entry at foot of page*] Mother at rest at last… Hm…The Black Ball… [*He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled*] Black Ball?...[*He peers again at ledger, reads.*] The Dark Nurse…[*He raises his head, broods, peers again at ledger, reads.*] Slight improvement in bowel movement condition. …Hm… Memorable…what? [*He peers closer.*] Equinox, memorable equinox. [*He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled*] Memorable Equinox? ... [*Pause. He shrugs his shoulders, peers again at ledger, reads.*] Farewell to – [*he turns page*] – love. (2012, 263)

Krapp and his younger selves appear to meet each other as if for the first time and this encounter is only possible under the *sine qua non* condition that one is absent (albeit implied). The discourse on the tape is conceived with a future "model" self in mind, but the actual presence on stage, the character Krapp, fails to live up to the ideal projections and seems, at times, unable to fully

grasp the complexity of the discourse, to meet the implied "encyclopaedic evidence" (Eco, 1981, 7) of the recording:

> TAPE: –back on the year that is gone, with what I hope is perhaps a glint of the old eye to come, there is of course the house on the canal where mother lay a-dying, in the late autumn, after her long viduity [*KRAPP gives a start*] and the–[*KRAPP switches off, winds back tape a little, bends his ear closer to machine, switches on*]–a-dying, after her long viduity, and the–
> [*KRAPP switches off, raises his head, stares blankly before him. His lips move in the syllables of 'viduity'. No sound. He gets up, goes backstage into darkness, comes back with an enormous dictionary, lays it on table, sits down and looks up the word.*]
> KRAPP: [Reading from dictionary.] State – or condition – of being – or remaining – a widow– or widower. [*Looks up. Puzzled.*] Being–or remaining? … [*Pause. He peers again at dictionary. Reading.*] 'Deep weeds of viduity.' … Also of an animal, especially a bird … the vidua or weaver-bird…. Black plumage of male…. [*He looks up. With relish.*] The vidua-bird!
> [*Pause. He closes dictionary, switches on, resumes listening posture.*] (2012, 266)

In light of the observations above, it would seem that in *Krapp's Last Tape*, Samuel Beckett aims consciously towards the illustration of an "imperfect monologue", with the main character, the speaker, removed from the centre and closer to "the edge of the stage" (2012, 262), the fractured discourse assuming the focal point. Who, we may wonder, is the (ideal) receiver of Krapp's *last* tape, who is its (model) audience? Is Beckett's theatre, as Martin Esslin suggests, "overwhelmingly interior monologue" (2011, 17), with the character delivering "whatever snatches of thought come into his head, with no concern for logic or censorship" (Pavis 1998, 219), or is it something else?

Two main characteristics of the monologue drama become evident in Beckett's play, further cementing its status as an autonomous theatrical form, as if the playwright desired to dilute methodically all traditional components of the monologue (be it "formal" or "perfect") in order to reach its theatrical essence: the pre-eminence of the *fractured discourse* and its fundamental *performative* dimension. Earlier works, such as "Act Without Words I" and "Act Without Words II" (1956), both removing the discourse completely and focusing exclusively on the actions of the characters, seem to confirm this quest.

Beckett's monologue drama is an overarching artistic form that encompasses both speech and action in a clearly marked and minutely

elaborated theatrical setting, as evidenced by the abundance of stage directions methodically outlining both the set design and the actions of the title character:

> *KRAPP remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, looks at his watch, fumbles in his pockets, takes out an envelope, puts it back, fumbles, takes out a small bunch of keys, raises it to his eyes, chooses a key, gets up and moves to front of table (…) Finally he has an idea, puts banana in his waistcoat pocket, the end emerging, and goes with all the speed he can muster backstage into darkness. Ten seconds. Loud pop of cork. Fifteen seconds.* (2012, 261-262)

Krapp's discourse, his last tape, is inseparable from, we are to understand, his last actions as his last recording alone, no longer destined for a "future I", is stripped of its implicit dialogism, becoming nothing more than a sequence of words devoid of meaning. It is only within the pre-established theatrical setting that it gains in significance as one of the components of the overall performative construct, the *monologue performance*, "a form of dialogic monologue with a consciousness of audience" (Gontarski 2004, 197). In theatre, Beckett seems to suggest, the monologic discourse alone cannot account for the "dramatic action", nor bring about the "revelation of the character", but rather it requires a complex set of interdependent, although not necessarily immediately evident, elements:

> In "Krapp's Last Tape" one solitary actor, in an empty space with the debris of his life unseen in a half-open drawer, has to convey his whole world past and present. Although there appears to be nothing on the stage, there is a huge amount of work to achieve that nothingness and to find the right table, and chair and objects for the actor that are both practical and poetic. (Howard 2003, 97)

Beckett's later dramatic works would drill further into the structure of the monologue, with his 1964 "Play" explicitly dismantling both character and discourse. The title is a play-on-words, the word "play" denoting both "theatre piece" and "game", a reference both to its innovative structure and to its fundamentally theatrical essence. On stage, "front centre, touching one another", we see "three identical grey urns" (2012, 367) from which the heads of the three characters, W2, M, W1, can be observed. Their speech is activated by the rapid shifts of a "spotlight projecting on faces alone".

The three characters on stage are completely stripped of any identity, nameless, shapeless and motionless, "faces impassive throughout" and "voices

toneless except where an expression is indicated" (2012, 367). They engage in "polyphonic stage monologues" (Riquelme 2014, 397), uttering, in the order permitted by the all-powerful spotlight for whom they are mere "victims" (2012, 381), fragments of their discourse, pieces of their story which, in the absence of an immediate addressee, "reduces the value of the monologue to true only" (Teodorescu Brânzeu 1984, 141). Three parallel and sometimes overlapping equally valid versions of the same ordinary chain of events (a love triangle), three pieces of discourse are able to account for the dramatic action of the entire piece, bringing it closer to tragedy in terms of their "absolute unrecognition"[3], their incapacity to acknowledge each other's points of view and engage in dialogue. They demand recognition for themselves and their own truth – "Am I as much as…being seen?" (2012, 381) – but, confined as they are, they are incapable to recognise each other. The playwright's decision to blend these voices into a "chorus" supports this claim. Far removed from its use in Greek tragedy where it "consists of non-individualised and often abstract forces (…) that represent higher moral or political interests" (Pavis 1998, 53)", the chorus in "Play" is nothing more than a self-referential echo of the monologic discourse, both suggesting the absence of a higher "moral" authority and preventing the audience from assuming such a role. Overshadowing the character, the *fractured discourse* assumes a focal position centre-stage, absorbs the roles of character (individualised) and chorus (non-individualised), in other words, it becomes a *performer* staging his own self. A performer, argues Patrice Pavis, "is someone who speaks and acts on his own behalf […] and thus addresses the audience" distinguishable from an *actor* who "represents his character (…) plays the role of another" (1998, 262). With the character reduced to a minimum, *speech* becomes the focus of "Play", in control of the dramatic tension. Yet another crucial element, the speaker, is disconnected, without being completely eliminated, from the anatomy of the monologue, leaving the *speech in performance* as its only indispensible condition.

However peripheral, the characters in "Play" are still discernible: a man (M), possibly his wife (W1) and presumably his mistress (W2). Their discourse, though detached and quasi-independent, is still illustrative of an *I*, of an individual human being. Beckett will later explore the "speaker-speech" relationship in monologue drama in his 1972 play "Not I".

The title signals "the avoidance of the first person pronoun" (Wallace 2006, 12) and the speech uttered by MOUTH only refers to a third person,

[3] See, for instance, Vartic, Ion. 1995. *Ibsen şi "teatrul invizibil". Preludii la o teorie a dramei* [*Ibsen and the "Invisible Theatre". Prologue for a Theory of Drama*]. Bucharest, Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică, 93-97.

occasionally feeling the need to clarify, as if responding to a question, "… what?... who?... no!... she! (2012, 444). This could very well be indicative of her refusal to "admit this wilderness of a life is hers and hers alone" (Nightingale 2005, 372), or, as there is no indication that MOUTH is, in fact, the same woman's mouth, it could be a rejection of any such association. MOUTH thus informs the audience that *It* is only the medium through which someone else's, a woman's, story is delivered. The speech is the one and only performer, "not I", the channel, the *mouthpiece*, seems to be the implication.

The *fractured discourse* as its own *performer* does not require the existence of a character (be it well-defined or barely sketched), it desires to be self-sufficient, self-explanatory, the sole conveyor of meaning and of drama on stage. But it does require an implicit (rooted in the dramaturgical construction) or actual stage and an implicit or actual audience for its full manifestation, consequently becoming *performing fractured discourse*, a speech presenting its self as disconnected from any character.

"A Piece of Monologue" (1979), the only one of Beckett's plays to have the word "monologue" in its title, takes the process of circumscribing the limits of monologue drama to completion. "Well off center downstage audience left" (2012, 497) stands SPEAKER, unnamed, "identified only by theatrical function" (Riquelme 2014, 400), delivering, in the third person, a speech whose "language projects a way of thinking and being that we are unlikely ever to have encountered or imagined", one "markedly meta-theatrical" (2014, 399). Similar to MOUTH from "Not I", SPEAKER in "A Piece of Monologue" fulfils the function of channelling the performing *fractured discourse*. He is the vehicle through which the self-contained speech is allowed to take centre stage and perform itself, "transferring to the audience or reader the means and the responsibility for generating meaning" (Riquelme 2014, 402).

Perhaps the inclusion of "Breath" (1969) in this study might seem a bit baffling. Less than one page long, this piece consists of nothing but stage directions, but we consider it can prove instrumental in exemplifying the performative dimension of the monologue drama, as it emphasises the relationship between *speech* and *theatrical context* in generating the *performance* in the absence of both character and performer. On a stage "littered with miscellaneous rubbish" (2012, 439), two brief "identical" cries can be heard, preceding a moment of inspiration (the first one) and following a moment of expiration (the second one). *Speech* (in the form of human sound) and *theatrical space* (a stage before an audience) are the only two conditions necessary for this monologic performance to find its fulfilment, making possible the spectator's/reader's "generation of varying and multiple meanings" (Riquelme 2014, 402).

Conclusions

By testing the generally accepted limits of the monologue, Samuel Beckett discovers that for *monologue drama* to exist it is not the condition of *speaker/character* that takes precedence, but that of *speech*, of *performing discourse* (albeit reduced to nothing but a "faint brief cry"). Dislocated from a character, *fractured* (its linearity challenged by either the juxtaposition of a multitude of equally valid agents/speakers, or by its own self-referentiality), the *discourse* occupies the stage and becomes performative. *Speech* and *Audience* in a distinctly outlined *theatrical context* seem to be the major underlying imperatives of the playwright's monologue dramas.

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