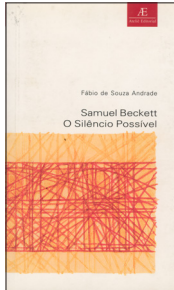


Going after the Wish for Silence: Understanding Some of Beckett's Voices



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Fábio de Souza Andrade. *Samuel Beckett: O Silêncio Possível*. São Paulo: Ateliê, 2001.

If the number of critical essays and studies is a good indicator of the importance of a writer, Samuel Beckett's work can be placed without a doubt among the most important of the last century. And it actually is, but in its own right as an oeuvre that has caused impact, brought forth innovation, questioned standards, and radically changed the canon of works to which it belongs.

Dealing with it, therefore, implies from the start a double challenge to the critic that is faced with Beckett's varied, never easily-grasped texts and plays, and with the immense, ever-growing critical literature about them. In *O Silêncio Possível*, Fábio de Souza Andrade responds successfully to this difficult task, introducing the reader to the beckettian world through the author's most famous novels, the post-war trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. Andrade's book addresses some of the essential issues raised by Beckett's work, which include the relationship between subjectivity and consciousness, the modern crisis of the subject, and the representation of the world in literature. Underlying these themes is the concern about the place occupied – or rather, created – by the three novels in the development of this art form.

Before carrying out his readings, Andrade proceeds with a revision of the critical bibliography in a very profitable manner for he not only gives the reader a thorough account of beckettian studies, but also stresses the main points he is about to discuss. Thus, the reader is given a consistent view of the questions raised by Beckett's works at the same time that he gains insight into the critic's chosen path to approach them.

The first leading topic tackles the way the trilogy moves further and further away from a realistic representation of the world. Crucial to this dismantlement of the novel form as it had been inherited from the 18th and 19th centuries is the treatment given to the first-person narrators. There is a progressive loss of objectivity presented as an impossibility of assurance; any traces of reliability still found in the modern narrator are definitely wiped out. As Andrade indicates, the most common figure of speech is

epanorthosis, defined as the process of resuming something said previously only to reinterpret it in a totally opposite light, or at least in a way that is significantly different from the first interpretation given. A famous instance of this procedure is the end of *Molloy*: “Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining.”¹

The two parts of the first book of the trilogy are analysed in detail: the narrators, temporality, allusions – mythic, biblical, literary, philosophical –, and the difficulty of finishing. Although Andrade does not state it, we can see these elements grouped as follows: the first two, comprising the narrator’s importance and the handling of temporality, which no doubt constitute essential aspects of any novel, are shown to have been consciously subverted by Beckett in his search for a new form “to accommodate the chaos”, as the novelist himself put it. The last two are studied in the peculiarity that stems from the same source: Beckett’s only too personal way of quoting without ever fulfilling the reader’s wish for a completely clear reference and the author’s/narrator’s uneasiness with ending due to a rejection of completion.

Instead of focusing straight on *Malone Dies*, Andrade skilfully introduces one chapter on the play *Fin de Partie*.² Begun in 1954 after the publication of *L’Innommable*, *Fin de Partie* was written in French and concluded in 1956. Fábio de Souza Andrade researched the Beckett archives and gives an account of the genesis of this play, illuminating Beckett’s methods of composition, not only by discussing the early drafts, but also by commenting on the modifications introduced by Beckett after the play had been first staged. The importance of this strategy is twofold: it takes us closer to the beckettian writing process and it brings together the prose work and the theater.

In the critical bibliography of Beckett’s work, there is a certain cleavage between the in-depth studies dedicated to the theater – and other media – and those dedicated to the prose. When the critic chooses to include among his readings of the three post-war novels a reading of *Fin de Partie*, he demonstrates that Beckett’s prose and his theater should not be regarded as separate works in different genres bearing only occasional resemblances to one another. In fact, Andrade presents clear relationships between this play and the trilogy. The similarities go beyond a likeness in themes; they reveal an artistic effort which went in the direction of expressing the subtraction, the poverty, and the failure conspicuous in the world. Consequently, the reading of *Fin de Partie*, because of the abundance of material related both to its genesis and to the later changes therein introduced, helps us understand the radical descent into destitution carried out by the two other novels of the trilogy.

So, when Andrade comes to discuss *Malone Dies*, the reader is much more aware of Beckett’s artistic procedures. He argues that the narrator feels the urge to keep author and character, fact and fiction, life and art, apart, only to stress more and more his inability to do so. Malone, like all the other narrating characters of the trilogy, faces enormous difficulties to conclude what he set about to do. This is seen pervasively in the failure of his project to create stories that should have nothing to do with himself, along with the ever-ineffective record of his decaying condition and the inventory of his possessions. Malone is, thus, a completely unreliable narrator; not even his death can be regarded as an assured end,

for, as Andrade pinpoints, the title of the novel – *Malone Dies* – expresses it in the present tense, revealing its continuity or inconclusiveness.

And indeed, the reader will meet Malone again in the opening pages of *The Unnamable* when its narrator sees a procession of previous beckettian narrators and protagonists orbiting around him. *The Unnamable* is regarded as the summit of Beckett's project to create "a literature of the unword", as the writer described it in a letter he wrote almost two decades before. The chapter dedicated to this most demanding work, however, does not have the same strength or length of the others. Even so, Andrade explains Beckett's refusal to grant the voice in the book any identity by discarding the narrator's attempts at forging one.

Andrade's book guides the reader through the tough trail that Beckett's first French novels opened up for the prose of the 50's, disclosing an unknown path for the genre. It is worth it to reinforce that the author aptly reviews the essential beckettian criticism. On the one hand, he incorporates classic readings of Beckett's oeuvre, as the one on humour by Ruby Cohn or some of Hugh Kenner's insights on the peculiar nature of the novelist's use of Cartesian philosophy. Also, relevance is given to the essay on *Fin de Partie* written by Theodor Adorno. The German philosopher's approach of Beckett's play draws attention to specific connections Andrade's own book is intent on making; namely, the role the three post-war novels play when it comes to reconsidering the "mimetic categories in western fiction". On the other hand, the critic discusses points of view with which he disagrees, avoiding evasion of controversial topics such as the appropriateness of the configuration of the subject only *a posteriori* as supported by Thomas Trezise.

O Silêncio Possível ends with some notes on the fiction written after the trilogy, leaving the reader with a comprehensive view of Samuel Beckett's work, as well as with a promise of further critical writings on the writer's later prose. Moreover, there are four extremely useful appendices. They include two of the most important writings in which Beckett himself gives hints about his views on literature and art: the German letter of 1937 and the three dialogues with Georges Duthuit of 1949. In addition, there are some short interviews with the author and a chronology of the main books cited, with the respective references to their translations into Portuguese when they exist.

Fábio de Souza Andrade's book reveals a serious academic scholar and essayist. It makes its way into the vast canon of Beckett studies with a great advantage to the Brazilian reader: he will be able to find a much clearer passageway into this oeuvre in which the wish for silence produces a plethora of voices not easy to make out.

Notes

- 1 Samuel Beckett. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. New York: Grove Weindenfeld, 1991, p. 176.
- 2 This play has also been translated into Portuguese by the author of *O Silêncio Possível* (Samuel Beckett, *Fim de Partida*. Trad. Fábio de Souza Andrade. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2002).



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