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The Organs of Perception and Expression  
in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Works

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí diplomové práce (supervisor):  
Ondřej Pilný, PhD.

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Zpracoval/a (author):  
Giulia Parin

studijní obor (subject/s):  
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*I'd like to thank my supervisor Ondřej Pilný, PhD., for his guidance, his patience and his frankness, which I truly needed to complete this work.*

*Thanks to my boyfriend and to my parent for their tireless support.*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on three plays written by Samuel Beckett: *Play*, *Not I* and *Footfalls*. Corporeality is the central theme of these works, which also connects them to an important and celebrated source of study and inspiration for the dramatist, *The Comedy* of Dante Alighieri. The influence played by Dante's descriptions of the body, particularly in the cantica of *Inferno*, is visible in Beckett's works for the ways in which the organs of perception and expression are treated at both textual and theatrical level. In the three plays the activities of mouth, eyes, ears (and less relevantly, nose) constitute the narrative focus of the text, while the sensorial aspects derived by their presence on stage determine the kind of exchange at play between actors and spectators. Staging immobilized, constricted and barely visible characters who, narrating obscure, uncertain stories, obsessively try to make a sense of their existential and physical conditions, the author gives life to a metatheatrical language rooted on instability and doubt.

After the introductory opening chapter, the second chapter looks at the language of Dante's *Inferno* and at its thematization of corporeality, introducing the continuities between the poem and Beckett's drama. The third chapter juxtaposes the characters and the uncertain narrative of *Play* to the the figures and to the atmospheres described by Dante in the circles of the Sins of Incontinence. The fourth chapter provides a reading of *Not I* in light of two episodes of interrogation and confession that Dante describes in Canto XXXII of *Inferno* and Canto XXXI of *Purgatorio*. The fifth chapter compares the character of *Footfalls'* to the Dantean figures of the Futile. After the confrontation with the Dantean source, the chapters devoted to the analysis of the plays proceed with the analysis of the textual and scenographic treatment Beckett gives to the organs of expression and perception of the characters and subsequently, with the consideration of the audience's experience of the performance.

## ABSTRAKT

Tato diplomová práce se zaměřuje na tři divadelní hry, jejichž autorem je Samuel Beckett: *Hru, Ne já* a *Footfalls*. Ústředním tématem těchto děl je tělesnost a toto téma je rovněž spojnicí se známým a významným předmětem studia a zdrojem inspirace tohoto dramatika, s *Božskou komedií* Dante Alighieriho. Vliv Dantových popisů těla, zvláště v kantice *Peklo*, jsou patrné v Beckettových dílech kvůli způsobu, kterým zachází s částmi těla smyslového vnímání a vyjadřování jak v textové, tak v divadelní rovině. V těchto třech hrách jsou středem narativu textu činnosti úst, očí, uší (a méně významněji nosu), zatímco smyslové aspekty odvozené z jejich přítomnosti na jevišti určují druh probíhající komunikace mezi herci a diváky. Autor vytváří metadivadelní jazyk vyrůstající z nestálosti a pochybnosti inscenováním znehybnělých, sevřených a sotva viditelných postav, které se snaží najít smysl svých existenciálních i fyzických situací.

Po úvodní kapitole, se kapitola druhá zaměřuje na jazykovou rovinu části Danteho *Pekla* a tematizaci tělesnosti, rovněž uvádí spojitosti mezi tímto básnickým dílem a Beckettovými dramaty. Třetí kapitola porovnává postavy a nezřejmý příběh *Hry* s postavami a atmosférou popisovanou Dantem v kruhu Hříchu nestřídmosti. Čtvrtá kapitola umožňuje čtení hry *Ne já* v kontextu dvou epizod dotazování a zpovědi, které Dante popisuje v *Pekle*, zpěv XXXII. a v části *Očistce*, zpěv XXXI. V páté kapitole je srovnáván protagonista hry *Footfalls* s Dantovými postavami Netečnosti. Po konfrontaci s Danteho textem, kapitoly věnované analýze uvedených dramát pokračují rozborem textového a scénografického zpracování, a to jakým způsobem Beckett zachází se smyslovými a komunikačními orgány, a následně pokračuje úvahou nad zážitkem obecnstva z představení.

## I. Introduction

The study of Samuel Beckett's dramatic oeuvre and particularly, the experience of its theatrical performances, can be experienced as a shocking and yet enlightening encounter with the complexity and the vastness which the human body contains and can aspire to. From *Waiting for Godot* to *What Where*, respectively his first and last work, the kind of physicality the dramatic figures go through ranges from clownish, ghostly forms to creepy beings belonging to states half-way between humanity and materiality and between humanity and fictionality. The characters' brains and mouths are always rebuilding, deconstructing and ruminating about the sense and the facticity of their existence. Indeed, among the important themes which Beckett's theatre covers and heterogeneously develops, the primal one, the one on which all the others are rooted and from which they germinate, consists in the question of corporeal presence, in the discussion about its certitude, its necessity or its inevitability, together with the investigation of the ephemerality and the transitivity of its manifestations and of the possible verifications we can make of it.

Be this question a critique of theatre as a medium, which therefore comments on the boundaries between fictionality and performance or be it rather directed towards a psychoanalytical approach which takes into consideration the human unconscious drives in relation to the phenomenal manifestations they produce, what fundamentally emerges, is the specificity and the diversity of responses offered by the study of every different character of whichever Beckett's play we are dealing with. For even though the close correlation and the continuity between the numerous plays and the aesthetic phases of his oeuvre are well evident and revealed by the recurrent use of certain symbols and images, by the kinship between the psycho-physical states of the characters and even more, by the regular return of certain expressions and juxtapositions of words epitomizing the existential themes dear to the author, we cannot track any principle of stability in and between them, unless we are looking at the formal and scenographic equilibrium on which each play is constructed, notably built up by the author with a scrupulousness and a precision which have often been considered constrictive by directors willing to give their versions of his pieces.

The existential interrogations which connect and move the characters of Beckett's scripts are each time modulated in response to a specific environmental dimension. Or,

inverting the relation and stressing the reciprocity which distinguishes this operation, such concerns are implied in the spatial frame in which the characters find themselves in, being it the very surface and context from which they originate. Therefore, contained by Absurdist landscapes, by barren aseptic zones or enclosed within domestic rooms, the cardinal issues of the works are fundamentally derived by the relation created between the inner subjective dimension of the figures and the external, objective, relational territory which they inhabit (or by which their psyche is inhabited). In other words, the body which acts and verbalizes led by its inner tensions is always confronted with what is exterior to it, and which nonetheless produces its conditions and limits, thus shaping its perceptive and expressive possibilities. As the French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out, “every external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body, just as every perception of my body is made explicit in the language of external perception.”<sup>1</sup> Along these lines, corporeality emerges as the central focus of Beckett's dramatic works, being as well the basic element upon which the practice of theatre is rooted. The author's theatrical experiments, especially those produced in his minimalistic phase, are particularly significant for the radical measure with which they expose and explore the mechanisms regulating the communication and the contact between different bodies -the staged ones as well as those of the spectators- and which are ultimately at the root of the transmission of narratives, norms and social behaviours from culture to culture, from generation to generation, from individual to individual.

The body considered as a unifying element of the human condition while simultaneously as the individual shell which lives private, subjective, unrepeatable experiences is a major theme and even more, the “material” basis for the fictional construction of an ancient masterpiece which was profoundly studied and admired by Beckett and which vastly inspired his visions and writings: Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*. With respect to Beckett's drama, it is mainly the *Inferno*, the first of the three parts of which this work is composed, which inspired the bleak landscapes and the tormented states of being that we find in the plays written between the sixties and the eighties. More precisely, the conditions of the damned souls that we find in Dante's *Inferno* are in many respects analogue to the psycho-physical states of the Beckettian figures. The association between the themes and the existential concerns of the two authors is notably testified by the dramatist's display of figures and scenarios narrated by the Florentine, which are also resonant with the iconographic interpretations that eminent

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* translated by Donald A. Landes (London; New York; Routledge: 2013) 249.

artists like Sandro Botticelli and Gustave Doré issued from this work.<sup>2</sup> The recognition of the strong impact released by the figurative renditions of a narrative which sees the fictional alter-ego of the author travelling through the reigns of the Christian afterlife in order to arrive step after step, encounter after encounter, and essentially, dialogue after dialogue, to the grasping of the existential knots which weighs over the mortality of the human body, is reflected by the memorable iconic characterization of Beckett's minimalistic aesthetic and also by the gravity with which he endows the visual and auditory aspects of his plays, being them the qualities raised from the text and transmitted from the stage to the audience, namely from the source of expression to the receiver, from the speaker to the auditor, from body to body.

In fact, what Beckett essentially derives from Dante and consequently problematizes in his plays, is the consideration of the isolated acts and events constituting the chain of transmission by which subjects belonging to separate environmental and physical circumstances are put in contact. According to Daniela Caselli, author of *Beckett's Dantes, Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism*, an important contribution to the study of the vast contiguity between these two authors,

Beckett's texts ... while placing Dante as authority, source, allusion and model to be parodied, also question the notions on which such concepts rely, namely the opposition between inside and outside, memory and invention, and source and end product. Most significantly, these different Dantes are part of a large infernal (intratextual) strategy of reduplications, mirrorings, echoes and mises en abyme which shape the Beckett corpus.<sup>3</sup>

The implications of such observation assume different shades depending if we are dealing with works which are supposed to conserve their written form or alternatively, with texts on which a theatrical performance is meant to be constructed. In fact, Caselli's words signal that in Beckett's artistic endeavour there is a preoccupation with a basic principle of transformation which develops from the constitutive material of a literary work to the fictional entities it realize and to the possible external, independent realities it can

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<sup>2</sup> In his extensive and accurate biographical work on Samuel Beckett, James Knowlson writes consistently about the author' sensibility to paintings and visuals art in general. *Damned to fame: the life of Samuel Beckett*. (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Daniela Caselli *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the fiction and criticism* (Manchester ; New York, Manchester University Press, Palgrave: 2009 ) 2.

engender, a movement which gives to the text a kind of life, the faculty of originating something exterior and different from it.

Inasmuch as the works considered by this thesis, *Play* (1963), *Not I* (1972) and *Footfalls* (1976)<sup>4</sup> transpose, adapt and communicate into the reality of movement and corporeality some of the atmospheres described in the *Comedy*, it is important to stress the evident formal distinctions which surface between the field of dramatic action and that of literature: evidently, the medium determines the physical conditions of the subject who is relating with the work. On the one hand, the materiality of the written page - the surface on which a text is conveyed, its stable location- is the guarantee of the inflexibility of its form, the preserver of a safe accessibility to its contents as well as the element offering a relatively interpretative and imaginative freedom to the subject who enters in relation with it. Under these circumstances the reader's reception of the work is basically mental and relatively independent from the space in which the reading experience takes place. In addition, only a part of his/ her body is actively implied in such activity, namely the eyes deciphering the letters. We can assume that a person engaging with a textbook – for how shocking or lively its content may possibly be- has essentially always the control of his/ her physical conditions, of his/ her presentness insofar as the body acts on a text inscribed on a fixed surface, available and subordinated to the subject's will and intentions.

On the other hand, even by just figuring a person reading a text aloud on his/ her own, with eyes and mouth uttering and consequently the ears perceiving the sounds produced, we are already landing in the territory of theatricality inasmuch as separate organs of expression and perception are actively joint in the experience and producing something out of the text, something which changes the physics of the space they occupy as well as the very functioning of the articulatory faculties of those body parts which permit the reception and the release of matter external to them. What follows such considerations is therefore the acknowledgement that drama, and more precisely, theatre – as a space, as a practice, as performance and spectacle- implies that the bodies participating to it undergo a series of constrictions which are the very factors conveying a sensual experience of it. While through a written text we access a sense which has been rationalized by the linguistic code a writer is using, the sense conveyed by a theatrical performance -despite the fact that it may respond to a form which underwent rationalization and structuration- is primarily phenomenological, manifested as materiality which imposes on the senses of the spectator, who is consequently confronted with a primal, unconscious encounter with

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<sup>4</sup> The dates refer to the year of the first productions.

it. In this light, meaning is transmitted as sound, or a image, or why not, as a smell, in a simultaneity that contains each of these differentiated realities. In sum, a theatrical performance works by constantly reworking the total form of the written text, transforming it into a phenomenon whose form is vacant and constantly exposed to external factors.

Along these lines, this thesis focuses on Beckett's theatrical treatment of the superficial parts of the body which allow the delivery and the exchange of sense and which are responsible for its expression and its perception. The aim is to track how the focus on these organs' presence and functioning achieves a dual, controversial effect: it channels a principle of instability uniting performers and spectators into an experience where each subjective position is recognized but simultaneously destabilized. The three plays analysed, expose the mechanisms of exchange at play between the organs of perception and expression the human body is provided with by highlighting the compulsive necessity the characters have to express while at the same time displaying a resistance to be fixed with a definite meaning and role. The reason for acknowledging the *Inferno* as the background source and reference for this analysis, is prompted by the view that a fundamental linguistic and existentialist<sup>5</sup> trait d'union exists between Beckett's and Dante's texts which emerges from the observation of their narrative treatment of the parts of the body which allow the contact and the possibility of communication between positions external to each other: envisaged as sites of transformation, channels through which a compulsive mechanism of construction of reality is constantly at play, mouth, eyes, ears (and less relevantly for the context of this study, nose) and their perceptive and expressive faculties are the principal object of narration. In Dante they constitute the unalienable factor which unites authors, characters and readers; in Beckett's plays, they undergo diverse treatments which are nevertheless all characterized by a maximalist or minimalist rendition of their appearances and manifestations.

While Dante refers directly to such organs insofar as they are implied within the actual process of writing he is performing, which he conceives as an effort to rationalize what the body and senses of his fictional self find along his path, Beckett's rendition of

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<sup>5</sup> For the relation of Beckett's oeuvre with philosophy and Existentialism see Ruby Cohn, "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett" and Martin Esslin, "Introduction" *Samuel Beckett: a collection of critical essays*. ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1987) ; for a discussion of the existential concerns in Dante's *Comedy* see William Franke, "Reader' s Application and the Moment of Truth" *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Amilcare Iannucci (Toronto, Buffalo, London : Toronto University Press Incorporated, 1997).

their centrality encompasses both concealment and exposition. Despite the temporal and cultural distance which divides the authors' works, they convey the synergism as well as the discontinuity which respond to the conception of a corporeal unity which is nevertheless made by composite parts, responding to heterogeneous stimuli and producing different reactions. According to this, the three plays considered recall more or less explicitly some Infernal figures and convey their tormented psycho-physical conditions by the creation of a theatrical exchange rooted on the objective facticity of the "language of the body", as well as on the subjective, sensual exclusiveness of its reception.

Following this introduction, the Second chapter of this thesis deals with Dante's treatment of corporeal expression and perception in the *Inferno*. The circular movement which features the metaphysics of the Infernal structure and which stands as the principle regulating the punishments inflicted to the bodies of the damned will be discussed inasmuch as it reflects the organs' continuous circle of interpretation of reality, which nevertheless corresponds to the perpetuation of the pain they are condemned to suffer. The apprehension and the perception of the damned's tortured psycho-physical states is the factor by which Dante's senses and emotions are conditioned. The verbal and corporeal exchange between them becomes the material basis for the whole Infernal narrative.

Consequently, corporeality emerges as the unifying motif within the narrative mode that we find in *Inferno*: the organic quality with which language is infused surfaces from the author-narrator's descriptions of the very process of writing and telling as a chain of communication between subjects and bodies united by different corporeal participations within the same narrative. The display of such element of instability allows the foregrounding of the oppositional approaches which are inscribed in it: sympathy and subjectivism, voyeurism and objectification are the poles which define the kind of contact created between Dante and the damned souls he narrates. Translated into the Beckettian dramatic action, this corresponds to the relationship at play between audience and stage, spectators and actors. Dante's rendition of the problematic interaction between mouths, eyes, ears and noses is reported on stage by Beckett according to a system of dualisms which discloses the ultimate impossibility to fix positions, roles and therefore a definite value to the subject participating to such exchange.

The three following chapters are devoted to the plays considered by this study, respectively *Play*, *Not I* and *Footfalls*. Each of them is firstly connected to the Dantean Circle to which it makes reference by the comparison of the sensorial atmosphere on which

it focuses and of the physical conditions which it reports, in order to point out that an analogous concept of “sin” underlies the content of the narrative and the existential torment which feature the characters of the two authors. The Third Chapter, relates the uncertain narrative of *Play* to Cantos V, VII, IX, X and XI, where we find the descriptions of the Sins of Incontinence. These sins may be appointed as well to three figures on Beckett' stage, and their meaning and characterizations are reflected as well by scenographic aspects of the performance. The Fourth chapter, inspired by Keir Elam's essay “Dead-heads: damnation-narration in the ‘dramaticules’,<sup>6</sup> considers Canto XXXII of *Inferno* as the substantial source of *Not I*. Furthermore, in light of the liquid images that the play evokes we will make a little step outside of the *Inferno*, to relate Mouth's story to Canto XXXII of Purgatorio, where Dante's mouth must confess his sins to be purged by the waters of the river Lethe. Chapter Five, compares the revolving movement of *Footfalls'* protagonist to the figures we find in Canto III, the Futile, who in name of their inconsistent existences are put in the Ante-Inferno, as if they never lived.

Consequently, guided by the studies conducted by important critics of Beckett and drama like James Knowlson and Keir Elam, each chapter proceeds with the analysis of the textual and scenographic treatment of the organs of expression and perception, considered according to how they respond to the organizational and representational dualisms featuring the mise-en-scène and shaping the sensorial conditions of theatre as a space: operations of visual and auditory exposition or concealment are the variables which channel the articulatory compositeness according to which mouth, eyes, ears, nose are ordered and function. Also, they point out both the compatibility and the antagonism implied in the organs' expressive and perceptive efforts: these are the factors shaping the relationship between the figures on stage as well as the exchange between stage and audience.

In conclusion, from the juxtaposition of the different visual, auditory and narrative focus which each of these plays put on the organs 'movements and functions and which spaces from the negation to the persecution of their activities, the principle of instability featuring Beckett's theatrical language will emerge: a radical doubt is put on both the characters' and spectators' senses in the apprehension of how they are perceived and how they are meant to express and vice-versa. Such doubt is conveyed by the facticity and diversity of our bodies, always engaged in the creation and recreation of their individual stories and realities.

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<sup>6</sup> Keir Elam, “Dead-heads: damnation-narration in the ‘dramaticules’ ” *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

## 2. Corporeality, Expression and Perception in the *Inferno* of Dante Alighieri

### 2.1 Circularity and Movement of Bodies

This chapter provides a reading of the *Inferno* in view of the theatrical inspirations that Samuel Beckett draws from Dante's work, which exposes the instability of the relationship between the idea of "body" and that of "presence". A brief summary of the metaphysics of the *Inferno* will bring us to the consideration of the "language of the body" that the poet forges, to finally point out the traits that the dramatist derives from the First Cantica of the *Comedy* as well as the substantial differences which separate the authors' views of individuality and self.

Dante Alighieri's vision of the afterlife shows through the architecture he designates for the mystical territories his fictional alter-ego crosses along the path in the *Comedy*. It is not the interest of this survey to go too deep into the study of the symmetries holding together such world, but in order to grasp how the characters move in this dimension, a brief introduction to its metaphysics is needed. Evidently, the structural configurations of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* respond to a set of regulatory ideals that combine theology and Aristotelian thought, the religious and cultural cornerstones that the time in which Dante is writing retains from the Medieval systematization of Antique philosophy and Patristics. The concept of the "unmoved mover" that we find in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is here identified with God, the original source of movement which makes universe and life flow and which lacks an external cause of existence and motivation. As Dante repeatedly remarks in his text with smooth or severe lyricism, God is the originating principle of any human or cosmological form of life, it is the sovereign father and authority: its law creates and governs the whole cosmos and stands above it. Accordingly, Dante's journey towards purification and knowledge culminating with the encounter with the divine light, an ineffable force which pervades him and elevates his spirit and intellect, is a road in ascent.<sup>7</sup>

Even though an unquestionable linearity features the ultimate direction of the narrator's path as well as the hierarchy of the three realms in which the Christian afterlife

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<sup>7</sup> An explanation of the cosmological order of *The Comedy* is provided by the appendix "Dante's Universe" in *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine. Cantica 1, Hell (L'Inferno)* translated by Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penguin, 1949) 292-295; all future page references to *Inferno* will be to this edition and included in parentheses in the text. For a substantial discussion of the metaphysics of the *Comedy* see Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

is constructed, the poet conceives the circle as the elemental compositional unit of this system. In fact, despite their substantial differences, the spaces of which the three reigns are composed are all of circular nature. The element of difference and discontinuity between the total conception of a structure and between the specific parts which form it, namely the opposition between the shape of a linear segment and that of a circle, consists in the possibility of finitude and stability that is appointed to the former as opposed to the continuity and vitality that we find in the latter. Such tension fundamentally surfaces in the concluding lines of the *Comedy*, where Dante's expectation of total comprehension and knowledge are negated by the very authoritarian, autocratic legislation of the mystical system he is exploring.

Eternal light, that in Thyself alone  
Dwelling, alone dost know thyself, and smile  
On Thy self-alone, so knowing and so know!

The sphering thus begot, perceptible  
In thee like mirrored light, now to my view-  
When I had looked on it a little while-

Seemed in itself, and in its own self-hue,  
Limned with our image; for which cause mine eyes  
Were altogether drawn and held thereto

As the geometer his mind applies  
To square the circle, nor for all his wit  
Finds the right formula, howe'er he tries,

So strove I with that wonder- how to fit  
the image to the Sphere; so sought to see  
How it maintained the point of rest in it.

Thither my own wings could not  
But that a flesh my understanding clove

Whence its desire came to it suddenly

High phantasy lost power and here broke off;  
Yet, as a wheel moves smoothly, free from jars  
My will and my desire were turned by love,

The love that moves the sun and the other stars.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the fact that an overwhelmed, amazed Dante submits his senses and intellect to such sublime experience, and even if they draw a relationship of axiomatic dependence which ties the creature to the creator, these last and celebrated lines signal a fundamental divergence between the human nature and the divine authority. Till the very end, even though he is enveloped within the divine will and wheel, Dante speaks of his will of knowledge as of a particular part of a wider reality, which keeps its own direction and activity. The conclusion of his existential-spiritual climbing, which he had to undertake precisely because he had lost his “right road” (*Inferno, Canto I, 3*)<sup>9</sup>, returns to the image of the circle.

The fundamental promise which ties the Christians to their religion, and so the earthly existence to the afterlife dimension, is not only that of the eternal life of the soul, but also the belief in the resurrection of the body after death. The symbol of the circle illustrates the sense of continuity inscribed in this vision. In *Paradise*, circularity is present as the orbital movement of the ethereal forms inhabiting the spheres which rotate around the Empyrean, the highest sky where God dwells; the *Purgatory* is a concentric mount which the penitents must climb in order to deserve absolution and consequently, the salvation of Heaven, their path is a process of reconciliation towards a unity with God; *Hell* is a specular reflection of the mount of *Purgatory*, it is a concentric hole divided in nine circles. As opposed to the other reigns, in the *Inferno* circularity is not given as straightforward process towards stability and unity, but rather, it appears as a problematic, controversial state of perennial transition.

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<sup>8</sup> Dante Alighieri *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine. Cantica III, Paradise (Il Paradiso)* translated by Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds (London: Penguin, 1962). Canto XXXIII, 124-145.

<sup>9</sup> The original expression used by Dante is “diretta via”. The inflected adjective “diritta” (“dritto/ dritta” in Italian) indicates specifically a linearity of direction. Dante Alighieri *La Divina Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. G. Petrocchi, Edizione Nazionale della Società Dantesca Italiana (Milano: Mondadori, 1966-1967) Canto I, 3.

A distinction between the kind of corporeality that we find in the three *Canticas* serves the problematization of the particular state of the souls located in the *Inferno*. If the figures we find in *Paradiso* are spirits who manifest themselves as ethereal lights and impalpable forms, *Purgatorio* and *Inferno* host real bodies. In the former, bodies are pushed to work out a salvation which is obtained by their diligence in climbing the mount to extinguish their sins, this implying that their elevation depends also on the individual strength of their willingness. With regard to it, in canto IV, we find a familiar figure within the Beckettian canon, Belacqua.<sup>10</sup> He is a celebrated personification of negligence. Dante finds him in an apathetic mood, crouched under a stone and asks:

... “Belacqua” I began, “I see  
I need not grieve for thee henceforward; no,

But tell me: why dost thou resignedly  
Sit here? Is it for escort thou must wait?  
Or have old habits overtaken thee?”

“Brother,” said he, “what use to go up yet?  
He'd not admit me to the cleansing pain,  
That bird of God who perches at the gate”<sup>11</sup>

The example of this character stresses the fundamental difference between the Purgatorial and the Infernal condition. The penitents are put in what we can call a “regular” state of transition, which envisages an end, a final accomplishment of their efforts. As explained in the Sixth Canto of *Purgatorio*, the penitents can continue their climbing of the mount only during daylight. Sordello<sup>12</sup> explains this system to Dante with these significant words: “ ... it is night's gloom/ Makes impotent the will and thwarts it thus ”(*Purgatorio*, Canto VII, 56-57). So, while the penitents enjoy a relative “freedom” of movement, in the *Inferno*

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<sup>10</sup> The figure of Belacqua is present, in different guises, in Samuel Beckett's works of prose *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932) and *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934).

<sup>11</sup> Dante Alighieri *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine. Cantica 2, Purgatory (Il Purgatorio)* translated by Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955) Canto IV, 122-129. All future page references to *Purgatory* will be to this edition and included in parentheses in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Sordello da Goito was a troubadour. He was born near Mantua about 1200 and spent most of his life in Provence. Sayers *Purgatorio* 115.

any hope is negated and the bodies that are condemned in its Circles suffer a perennial state of constriction. The damned are thus doubly trapped between immobility and perpetuity. Their bodies are always passively stimulated by violence, to which they cannot react if not by lamentations of physical and verbal nature (when Dante interrogates them): their torture resides precisely in the continuous capability of perception of their bodies.

The atmosphere which reigns in the *Inferno*, can be best summarized by a number of lines of Canto III, where Dante and his guide, the Latin author Virgil, have just entered through its doors. In these lines, an identification between the emotional condition of the subjects inhabiting this territory and its environmental characteristics is drawn.

Here sighing, and here crying, and loud railing  
Smote on the starless air, with lamentation,  
So that at first I wept to hear such wailing.

Tongue mixed and mingled, horrible execration.  
Shrill shrieks, hoarse groans, fierce yells and hideous blether  
And clapping of hands thereto, without cessation

Made tumult through the timeless night, that hither  
And thither drives in dizzying circles sped,  
As whirlwind whips the spinning sands together.

*(Inferno, Canto III, 22-31)*

As we can see, the first impressions of Dante report a miscellany of human expressions of pain combined with the unfolding sounds of an harsh nature, which encircles the place with ruthless fury and anguish. Under these circumstances, the Christian cornerstone of hope, the promise of the resurrection of the bodies, becomes a seal of pain and suffering. As Virgil says to Dante while illustrating him the arduous path they are going to undertake, a “second death” (*Inferno*, Canto I, 117) is impending on the damned. In the day of the Final Judgement, “Each soul shall seek its own grave's mournful mounding/ Put once more its earthly flesh and feature/ And hear the Doom eternally redounding” (*Inferno*,

Canto VI, 97-99).

Dante is always able to recognise the characters he comes across. Their bodies are capable to perceive and express and are connected to the memory of their mortal existence by the tortures to which they are exposed: torn, fragmented, drowned and burnt, each one of these figures is reminded of his/her sins by the specific punishment he/she is inflicted. In fact, according to the *contrappasso* law, the inflexible scheme which regulates the distributions of the damned into the Nine Circles of the Infernal funnel, the sin which has been committed during the mortal life is to be punished by a specular corporeal castigation in the afterlife. A clear explanation of the logic of *contrappasso* is conveyed by the presentation of the character Bertrand de Bond, an Occitan poet. For having caused discord between King Henry II and his son, he is confined in the Ninth Bowge of the Eight Circle of Inferno, where the ones who caused schisms and ruptures are punished. Appearing as a “headless trunk” (*Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, 119) and bearing his head with his hands he explains:

Because I sundered those that should be one,  
I'm doomed, woe worth the day! to bear my brain  
Cleft from the trunk whence all its life should run;

Thus is my measure measured to me again.

(*Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, 139-142)

As the effective visual impact that the description of this figure conveys, a direct connection between interiority and exteriority is made, and more specifically, an identification between the psychological drive and the physical part of the body which is stricken. Therefore, being fraud a sin of the intellect, brain is presented as the cause of affliction of the damned. In the logic of *Inferno*, the excesses or the weaknesses of the subjects' interior movements are ascribed to the organs which are responsible for their expression. The circular sense inscribed in this vision, which sees interiority and action irrevocably tied as within an intermittent circuit of cause-consequence, is forcefully, visually rendered by the presentation of the figure called to judge and send the damned to their appropriate circle. The system used by the monstrous, snake-tailed Minos displays

the circle once again as the structural unit as well as the conceptual foundation of the Infernal logic.

There in the threshold, horrible and girning,  
Grim Minos sits, holding his ghastly session,  
And, as he girds him, sentencing and spurning;

For when the ill soul faces him, confession  
Pours out of it till nothing's left to tell;  
Whereon that connoisseur of all transgression

Assings it to its proper place in hell,  
As many grades as he would have it fall,  
So of the belts him round with his own tail.

Before him stands a throng continual;  
Each comes in turn to abye the fell arraignment;  
They speak – they hear – they're whirled down one and all.

(*Inferno*, Canto V, 4-15)

## 2.2 Organic Language of Inferno

A sense of circularity is fundamentally implied in the formation of the very corporeal focus of the *Inferno*. Moreover, the movement described by the circle functions as the scheme according to which corporeal acts of expression and perceptions are organized. To understand how this operation works, a stylistic consideration of the language used by Dante is needed. In accordance with the theory of *convenientia* that he expounded in his treaty on vernacular literature *De Vulgari Eloquentia*,<sup>13</sup> to talk about the vice and meanness which inhabit the *Inferno*, the Florentine uses a “low” style, which exploits the asperity of harsh sounds and poetic rhythms and which ranges from moments of horrific descriptions to peaks of grotesque irony. The effectiveness of such narrative strategy which

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<sup>13</sup> In the First Book of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (1303-1305) Dante elaborates a theory of eloquence according to which the language and the style of the writing must suit the subject which is being treated: noble themes like accounts of love and moral virtue deserve a refined, polished style while “low” subjects, as for example the vices and corruption we find in the *Inferno*, must be served by an harsh or even coarse language.

hinges on the creation of a sensory level of reception, is essentially rooted in a realism whose direct sources are the multiple corporeal presences and activities which animate the poem. In fact, not only is corporeality the main theme of the *Inferno*, but also, and most significantly within the aim of this study, the basic element which produces and releases its sociological significance inside and outside the fictional borders of the text.<sup>14</sup> To provide an example of Dante's crude realism and to see how he presents moral commentary together with its physical-phenomenological counterpart, let's take a look at Canto XVIII, where the Sycophants are drowned under dung.

The banks were crusted with foul scum, thrown off  
By the fume, and caking there, till nose and eye  
Were vanquished with sight and reek of the noisome stuff.

So deep the trench, that one could not espy  
Its bed save from the topmost cliff, which makes  
The keystone of the arch. We climbed; And I,

Thence peering down, saw people in the lake's  
Foul bottom, plunged in dung, the which appeared  
Like human ordure running from a jakes.

(*Inferno*, Canto XVIII, 106-114)

These lines notably belong to one of the coarsest and most grotesque portrayals of the poem, but apart from the display of such crude, degraded realism, they also signal Dante's reliance on the perceptive faculties of his character's eyes and nose to bring further the narration and to sustain the organic, corporeal theme of the text. As a consequence, the reader's reception of this scene consists not only in the mental visualization of the landscape whose morphological features are accurately described, but also in the realization of the olfactory, non figurative qualities which characterize this environment. In this light, corporeality and more specifically, the organs responsible of perception – in this

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14 Some of the characters that Dante locates in the *Inferno* were important figures alive and active when the poet wrote his masterpiece and gave them a “public judgement” through it. An example of this is the case of Friar Alberigo, a traitor who plotted the murder of two men of his own kin. Canto XXXIII, 121-123.

case, eyes and nose- become sites of reflection and exchange, connecting and establishing a principle of “osmotic” sensory transference between the narrator, the narrated and the readers.

Multiple and spread throughout the narrative are in fact the episodes of transverse, mediated contact between three separate categories of bodies: if the existential experiences of the author, the characters and of the reader are united by the allegorical language presented by the narrative of the *Comedy*, the different qualities of their presence are mediated by the autonomous reality the text consists of once it has been written and delivered. With regards to this, an accurate study conducted by Daniele Monticelli on the function of paratexts in the *Inferno*, can help us to clarify how such contact between elements which are internal and external to the text can take place. According to him, the endings of the Cantos function as “liminal spaces of communication between the internal and external [as well as] points of (dis)articulation between the different narrative and cognitive planes”<sup>15</sup> of the text, an observation derived by the consideration of the relationship at play between the two Dante which are present in the text and which separately operate from the inside and from the outside of the narrative.

According to the critic, the distinction between the voice of Dante the author and that of Dante the character, whose respective points of view are fundamentally rooted in the separation between the temporal dimensions in which they act and according to the different narrative operations and sources they carry out and report, namely memory and writing for the former, experience and orality for the latter, is sometimes blurred. Indeed, a confusion merging in an anxiety over the capability of words to report experience -a topic which will be discussed in the final paragraphs of this chapter- sometimes “arises from the interference of Dante Character's experience and Dante Author's thought”,<sup>16</sup> as for example at the end Canto IV. After listing the figures of the philosophic train the traveller meets in the Limbo the poet continues:

Nay, but I tell not all what I saw then;  
The long theme drives me hard, and everywhere  
The wondrous truth outstrips my staggering pen.

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15 Daniele Monticelli, “From Living Experience to Poetic Word. Frames and Thresholds of Dante's Divine Comedy” *Interlitteraria*, issue: 18 (1) / 2013:244.

16 Monticelli 247.

The group of six dwindles to two; we fare  
For a new way, I and my guide withal,  
Out from that quiet to the quivering air,

And reach a place where nothing shines at all.

(*Inferno*, Canto IV, 145-151)

Here, the flux of events that the character is living seems to be interrupted by the narrative exigences of the author, who cuts short an episode characterized by a more placid tone than the rest of the *Inferno*, to which the reader is reported by the anticipation of the qualities of the ambience to which the narration will proceed in the next Canto.

On the other hand, an important element of continuity between the two Dante, is the role of the poet, as creative authority and as reporter of events.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the damned often express the urgent desire for their stories to be known and told through him and his art : “Then, when thou shalt rejoyce to say, 'I was,'/Look that thou speak of us to living men”(*Inferno*, Canto XVI, 84-85), thus combining the experience of Dante the traveller and Dante the author, namely the actual presence of the former, a present body in front of them, with the future possibilities given by his literary skills once that body will exit their territory. In other words, the damned refers to the process of storytelling at work within the narrative operation the text of *The Comedy* consists of, a reality which stands outside of their own.

Storytelling is conceived as way to effect a change on the reality of earthly existence- The stories of the damned need to be told so that their immoral example can function as an admonition that prevents the reader from committing sin or causing injustice. As Daniel Punday states in his *Narrative Bodies:towards a corporeal narratology*, “an act of communication is narrative whenever and only when importing a transitive view of the world is the effect of the message it produced”<sup>18</sup>. In this light, the sense of effective social and moral transformation around which Dante conceives his text, revolves around a notion

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17 As Dorothy L. Sayers notes in the introduction to the *Inferno*, “Dante in the *story* is always himself-the Florentine poet, and politician, the man who loved Beatrice. In the *allegory*, he is the image of every Christian sinner, and his pilgrimage is that which every soul must make, by one road road to another, from the dark solitary wood of Error to the city of God.” *Inferno* 67.

18 Daniel Punday *Narrative Bodies: toward a corporeal narratology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 140.

of “change” which envisages a modification to be accomplished via the realization and the delivery of a text in a space located outside of its narrative frame: the descent to the underworld serves the modification of the life on earth. With regard to this, numerous are the times when Dante explicitly summons the reader's attention, a strategy which evidently subscribes to those topoi established by the discursive institutions of eloquence and rhetoric.<sup>19</sup> In Canto XX, facing the tremendous conditions of the Foretellers who are drowned in mud with their heads turned upside down, Dante refers directly to the reader.

And, Reader, so God give thee grace to glean  
Profit of my book, think if I could be left  
Dry-eyed, when close before me I had seen

Our image so distorted, so bereft  
Of dignity, that their eyes' brimming pools  
Spilled down to bathe the buttocks at the cleft.

Truly I wept, leaned on the pinnacles  
of the hard rock ...

*(Inferno, Canto XX, 19-26)*

In the first stanza of the quoted passage, the poet asserts the edifying tone of his reports: the reader is expected to learn something from the narrative, to achieve something from the reading experience. Consequently, the author comments on the reaction of his fictional alter-ego, who cannot keep from crying in front of the desperate condition in which he finds these figures. Finally, the attempt to connect the experience of the characters, the reader and the poet culminates with the possessive pronoun “Our” juxtaposed to “image”,

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<sup>19</sup> In his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, E. R. Curtius deals with the display of *affected modesty*. The authors proceeding according to the rules of Antique Rhetoric, adopted it in the *exordium* of their writing. According to the German scholar, such approach is useful for the orator “to put his hearers in a favourable, attentive, and tractable state of mind. How to do this? First, through a modest presence”, 83-84-85. Even though the passage of the *Comedy* to which we are referring is not the *exordium* of the work nor of the Canto, the author's disposition in some way recalls the creation of a relationship of complicity with the reader that Curtius attaches to this strategy. The appeal Dante makes to the reader is characterized by the intention to sympathize with him/ her and to put in contact their experiences, an approach which accounts also for the description of the emotional condition of the character while facing the situation which is being narrated.

an expression whose call for identification relies on a principle of human, corporeal reflection. Such operation is fundamentally based on the effectivity and universality of the corporeal facticity, a language able to transcend the barriers between fictional and phenomenological world.

With regards to this, a brief phenomenological problematization of how this process takes place, is needed. Merleau-Ponty refers to the *function of projection* as to the process which ties verblivity to imagination, and which makes abstraction not only possible but also, and fundamentally, productive. According to the philosopher, such “abstract movement depends upon the power of visual representation”,<sup>20</sup> which relies also on the tactile and visual qualities that a message contains. The development and the familiarity with the spheres of tactility and of visual representation, which do not necessarily imply actual materiality, but rather, the knowledge of the possibility and of the meaning of *material presence*, functions thanks to what can be called the “extended experience of perception” with which our bodies interact with the world exterior to them.

In this light, we can consider the above-mentioned Dantean passage's call for human identification and pity rooted on such possibilities of productive abstraction supplied and produced by the subjective, individual as well as relational experience and knowledge we have of our bodies. Furthermore, through the last lines which have been reported, we can also examine Dante's specific treatment of the mechanism of perception and expression acted out by the eyes. The visualization of what is happening in front of him provokes a physical reaction in the character: tears are an external, visible and “tangible” product of the eyes. They are a phenomenological, material expression of their perceptive activity, objective signs of the emotional movement that the interaction with other bodies has produced. Such relation drawn between the interiority and the physicality of the individual, can be seen as reflecting the movement from intradiegetic space to extradiegetic space that the narrative effects, namely the transmission of the universality of the corporeal mechanisms through which we experience the world.

At this point, a step back to the Second Canto of *Inferno* is fruitful inasmuch as it allows us to observe that since the beginning of the poem there is a preoccupation with the “technical operation”<sup>21</sup> that Dante in his role of author faces, that is to render

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<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty 145.

<sup>21</sup> Such “technical operation”, is the written rendition that the author makes of the experience of his fictional alter-ego: since the text of *The Comedy* is in retrospect, what is inscribed in the “memory” of the character must be reported as a written record.

accurately the physical experience which Dante the character undertakes. Indeed, the perturbed tone of the poet's invocation to the muses, reveals an anxiety over his role as author and over Dante's gloomy path as traveller.

Day was departing and dusk drew on,  
Loosing from labour every living thing  
Save me, in all the world; I – I alone-

Must gird me to the wars – rough travelling,  
And pity's sharp assault upon the heart -  
which memory shall record, unfaltering.

Now, Muses, now, high genius, do your part!  
And Memory, faithful scrivener to the eyes,  
Here show thy virtue, noble as thou art!

(*Inferno*, Canto II, 1-9)

In the second last line, the poet refers to the memory of the character as to a material which has been written, recorded by his mental, intellectual faculties. Then, he spurs his creative skills as poet to be able to transmit the content of those visions. Therefore, Dante is problematizing here his task as author, that is to transfer the particular, individual experience of his fictional alter-ego into a transmittable, objective form. Moreover, as such process of writing connects the activity of the mind and that of the eyes, the distinction between the author and the traveller emerges in light of their interconnectedness: the two cover reciprocal roles in view of the construction of the text. If the former gives life to the text via a process of rationalization, the latter is envisaged as a character able to perceive with a body, he is the first source of mediation between the intradiegetic and extradiegetic spaces of the the text.

With regard to this, it must be noted that Dante the traveller retains a unique characteristic within the *Comedy*. He is in fact the only figure with a *soma*, an effective materiality attached to the body. The difference between his presence, that of the damned and that of his guide Virgil, appears for instance when crossing the Styx by boat: “So then

my guide embarked, and at his call/ I followed him; and not till I was in/ Did the boat seem to bear a load at all "(*Inferno*, Canto VIII, 25-27). Such peculiarity regarding the corporeality of Dante makes him a figure in-between the fictional and the "real" world. Despite his adventure symbolizes the path towards salvation and knowledge that humanity is called to follow, Dante the traveller is not a plain allegorical figure nor the author who is writing, rather we can say that he consists in the presence of the body of the author transposed inside the narrative.

The *Comedy* is an allegorical poem, concerned to derive universality from a specificity of figures and symbols that serve as an intervention into the reality of the time in which it is being written. According to David L. Pike, being "fundamentally an allegorical form", the literary topos of the descent to the underworld "rewrites and and transforms past images ... it functions as a repository for the past and as a crucible in which that repository is melted down to be recast as something other than what it had been".<sup>22</sup> In light of such resolution of change and transformation, adopting the medieval and Christian genre of the *exempla*, Dante's climbing till the elevation given by the vision of God, takes place by an escalation of encounters with figures whose stories and conditions have something to teach about morality and justice. Essentially, the comedy is the story of Dante's dialogues with these diversified figures, exchanges which are not limited to verbal, conversational or inquisitive modes.

The extreme physical conditions that Dante experiences in the *Inferno* are so forcefully corporeal and therefore, sensory, that the intellectual operation of rationalization acted by writing risks to be insufficient to express such organic theme.<sup>23</sup> In other words, in light of the stable form in which it renders the corporeal language of the Infernal afterlife, writing risks to be an imperfect means to transmit the exchanges which take place between the characters, who, constricted to torture and being capable of perception, are engaged in a circle of continuous external release and reception of what is happening to them. Even though the message that the stories of the sinners convey is clearly handed down and commented by Dante, in the *Inferno* a constant concern with the

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<sup>22</sup> David L. Pike *Passage through Hell: modernist descents, medieval underworlds* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997) 2.

<sup>23</sup> Discussing the *Inexpressibility Topoi*, E.R. Curtius notes that in light of the magnificence of the subject which will be undertaken, just a part of it will be thematized. In the case of the *Inferno*, we are evidently dealing with an excess of oddity and repulse in contrast to the nobleness and virtue of the celebratory forms which the scholar is specifically discussing. Nevertheless, the "author's assurance that he sets down only a small part of what he has to say" is an expression of the resistance of writing to report the fullness of an event or of an experience. The quoted passages and Curtius' treatment of this subject can be found in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. 159-160-161.

failure of expression is presented not only in light of the difficulty of verbal articulation that the damned must face, but also with respect to the author's process of elaborating the qualities of the corporeal experience that his character lives by giving them a written rendition: ineffability hunts the feasibility of this operation.

Orality (which is also connected with the spheres of sexuality and nutrition) implies a mechanism of aperture and closure of the mouth, which can be considered as hole through which a process of appropriation and release of something external to the body takes place. Accordingly, in the *Inferno*, the expressive possibilities of the mouth are blocked, persecuted by the conditions in which the damned are forced to dwell and constantly fight against. Apart from the example of Bocca degli Abati<sup>24</sup>, which will be examined together with Beckett's *Not I*, another telling case concerns the figure of Guido da Montefeltro, punished for having been a mischievous counsellor. Wrapped inside a flame of fire, at first his mouth cannot find space to articulate a distinguishable sound, which consequently is confounded with and assimilated to the noise of bursting fire.

Bellowed with its victim's voice, until the bull,  
Though brass throughout, appeared itself to roar,  
Pierced through with torments unendurable,

So finding at the start no way nor door  
Out of the fire, the sad words were translated  
Into fire's native speech ...

(*Inferno*, Canto XXVII, 10-15)

Such image of *contrappasso*, transforming a voice which was once persuasive in fire's whistles, evokes the blocking or the suffocation of a flux directed from one space to another ( i.e. the interiority of the subject and the external space where other's ears try to capture its expressive efforts), a process which can describe the moments of hesitation that the narrating voice of Dante often encounters in the course of his report. In this sense, the risk of failure in reporting with words what his fictional character sees and sensually grasp during his path is not so much reported as a weakness or deficiency inherent to writing: rather, it is the nature of the events that take place that cannot be served by a rational mechanism ending up with a stable form. In this perspective -and evidently, in light of the

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<sup>24</sup> Bocca degli Abati is a Florentine aristocrat who is put in the Ninth Circle of Hell, together with the Traitors to their own country. See Chapter 4.

indisputable, celebrated mastery of the language and of its multiple layers of sense that the Florentine displays - the risk of failure which the author posits, reflects that condition of instability which generally characterizes the metaphysics of this Cantica.

The rendition of the sense of ineffability that characterizes the expression of the tragic, horrific visions of *Inferno*, works essentially in two ways: by the faintings of the character Dante, which entail the interruption of his sensual perceptions and consequently, of the narrative, and by circumlocutions insisting on the incommunicable, exceptional character of the specific events which are narrated. The moments in which Dante loses his senses are provoked by feelings of pity and identification with the tragic fate and torment of the figures he meets. A notable example is that of Canto III, where he listens to the story of the lovers from Ravenna Paolo and Francesca, violently killed and punished for the strength of their mutual passion.

While the one spirit thus spoke, the other's crying  
Wailed on me with a sound so lamentable,  
I swooned for pity like as I were dying,

And, as a dead man falling, down I fell.

(*Inferno*, Canto V, 139-142)

This passage corresponds also the closing lines of the Canto. Conjuring up the black out of the perceptive and expressive faculties of the character, Dante passes to the new scenario he will find in the next Circle and Canto. The weakness of Dante's mortal body shows up also in Canto XXV, where thieves and their punishment are described. Here an episode of supernatural quality takes place, namely the metamorphosis of a human body into a serpent, a scene filled with horrific sensationalism. In the lines which follow the accurate, vivid chronicle of such supernatural event, the author draws upon an appeal to reader to assert the bewildered nature of what the traveller reports, a vision which causes turmoil to his senses. As we can see, the description of this event is introduced by a direct address to the reader and concluded by a request of comprehension that motivates the oddity of the account in light of the unnaturalness of the events that it reports.

Reader if thou discredit what is here  
Set down, no wonder; for I hesitate  
Myself, who saw it all as clear as clear.

Thus I saw change, re-change and interchange  
The seventh moat's ballast: if my pen has erred,  
Pray pardon me: 'twas all so new and strange.

And though my vision was perplexed and blurred,  
My mind distraught ...

(*Inferno*, Canto XXV, 46- 48;142-146)

In sum, considering the different narrative-temporal dimensions which determine the relationship of the three types of presence that the text involves, -the author, the characters and the reader- it emerges that the instability that permeates the *Cantica*, is grounded in the vision of the body as “as system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal place defined by its task and situation”.<sup>25</sup> From such assumption derived from Merleau-Ponty's thought, Punday formulates a narratological theory that we can apply to the *Inferno* to understand the central role of corporeality and movement which is thematized:

a kinetic theory of narrative based as much as the instability of space as the constant movement of time. Just as the body in narrative temporality challenges patterns and creates *distensions* within the story, so too the body is what makes setting unstable and forces constant movements.<sup>26</sup>

In light of its particular metaphysics, *Inferno* is conducive to dramatisation: Beckett draws some specific motifs and figures from this *Cantica* and he gives them an experimental, avant-gardist treatment through his works.

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<sup>25</sup> Punday 121.

<sup>26</sup> Punday 13-14.

### 2.3 Continuities and Differences between the *Inferno* and the Plays of Samuel Beckett

Before proceeding with the analysis of the Beckettian works constituting the central focus of this survey we need to sum up the substantial continuities and differences between the works of the playwright and Dante's poem. Firstly, we will look at the different aspects concerning the issue of authority, then continue with the consideration of the functions which the parts of the body are given in the texts, to finally draw an important distinction between how the language of the body signifies for a spectator attending a theatrical performance as opposed to how it is received by a reader dealing with a text.

The important contribution provided by Daniela Caselli on the study of the connections between the two authors is centred on the idea that “Dante's presence in Beckett is a part of a critique of value and authority.”<sup>27</sup> Starting from this point, the survey she carries out on different Beckettian works of prose, points out that there is not a fixed, derivative relationship of “master and pupil” between the two, where the younger incorporates the motives of the ancient source as unshakable cornerstones from which to start his own dramatic writing. As Caselli notes, “rather than asking how accurately or subversively Beckett (the author) reproduces Dante (the stable text)” it is meaningful and more productive to “explore how Beckett's text reinvent their own precursor, reversing the terms of the statement.”<sup>28</sup> Such statement accounts as well for the three plays considered in the next chapters, which Caselli does not discuss in her critical work. Positing a relationship of interplay rather than one of faithful reproduction between the newer works and their inspirational source, the critic states the autonomy and originality of the Beckettian work in spite of the appropriation and citation of images and motives that he derives from Dante. In view of the extensive and passionate study that Beckett devoted to the *Comedy*,<sup>29</sup> the elements which he draws from it are developed as deliberate deviations and problematizations issued from its many layers of signification.

As observed in the precedent paragraphs, the *Inferno* invites a dramatic recombination and reconsideration of its motives inasmuch as the narrative consists in a succession of dialogues and exchanges with a variety of characters which are carried out by a single authoritative voice. More precisely, Dante differentiates his point of view and presence as author and as traveller, and thus he achieves the double effect of taking a critical, objective distance from his narration while simultaneously appealing to the

<sup>27</sup> Caselli 1.

<sup>28</sup> Caselli 4.

<sup>29</sup> Accounts on Beckett's study of *The Comedy* are reported by James Knowlson, *Damned to fame : the life of Samuel Beckett* (London : Bloomsbury, 1997).

emotional force that is transmitted from the character to the readers by the creation of an osmotic effect of identification, which is rooted on the corporeal experience we have of existence. Indeed, mouth, eyes, ears and nose carry out the the action in the *Inferno* as well as in Beckett's plays in the sense that they provide the very possibility of dramatic exchange and movement according to the different mechanisms of perception and expression which they perform. They are the primary agents of the mechanisms which convey the specific meaning of the narration to the reader/listener, sites of reflection between the experience of the characters and that of the reader/ spectator.

In their works, the two writers examine and explore the binary dimension which each sensory act that an individual performs is charged of: objectification and identification, voyeurisms and participation, are the dualisms which respond to the vision of the body as a composite expressive unit which is simultaneously an object of perception, a mechanism whose irreducible transitoriness is accurately described by the following Merleau-Ponty's formulation:

The claim to objectivity made by each perceptual act is taken up by the following one, which is again disappointed and in turn taken up. This perpetual failure of perceptual consciousness was foreseeable from its beginning ... like the object's first attack upon my senses, the subsequent perception will pass by in turn, because like the subject of perception is never an absolute subjectivity, and also because he is destined to become an object for a later I. Perception is always in the impersonal mode of the "one".<sup>30</sup>

In light of the philosopher's reflection on the spatio-temporal mechanisms of perception, compulsion emerges as the reciprocal complementary side of the instability inscribed in the continuous process of perception-expression. *Inferno* gives us a forceful example of this binary logic: in fact, the even though the sinners don't have any perspective of change and reversal of their condition, they cannot be kept from expressing their own suffering, something which releases and intensifies their pain. The "automatic", visceral reactions to their irremediable condition, shape the ambience which Dante describes and become

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<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty 287.

material for the construction of the narration, which is charged of a universal, allegorical value. In Sayers' view, Dante's allegories differ from the conventional ones.<sup>31</sup> "The figures of the allegory, instead of being personified abstractions, are *symbolic personage*."<sup>32</sup> More precisely, she defines the Dantean system of symbology as a *natural* one.

A *natural* symbol is not an arbitrary sign, but a thing really existing which, by its very nature, stands for and images forth a greater reality of which it is itself an instance. Thus an arch, maintaining itself as it does by a balance of opposing strains, is a *natural symbol* of that stability in tension by which the whole universe maintains itself. Its significance is the same in all languages and in all circumstances, and may be applied indifferently to physical, psychical or spiritual experience. Dante's symbolism is of this kind.<sup>33</sup>

As their conditions are resonant with the ones of the sinners located in the Infernal circles, the Beckettian characters are equally expressing their torment and discomfort, with the fundamental difference that their remarks are uttered and directed to the ones who come to see them to enjoy a spectacle, the auditors/spectators, who in turn often become object of the blaming tones of the figures on stage. It is in this light that we can understand the meaning of the opposition between what Caselli calls "Dante's poetics of conversion" and "Beckett's poetic of perversion".<sup>34</sup> The antithesis between the two terms signals the cultural, ideological distance which is evidently at play between the authors and which marks the conception and the use of corporeality present in their works.

In fact, while the *Inferno* is grounded on the individual acts and perceptive faculties of eyes, mouth, ears, nose from which it extrapolates the sensory qualities to be transmitted to the reader, as the *contrappasso* law clearly epitomizes, its comprehensive treatment of the body is still irrevocably inscribed in a double logic based on the expectation of a conciliation between body and soul. Therefore, the kind of instability

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31 To illustrate how a conventional allegory works Sayers takes as example the *Romance of the Rose* and *The Pilgrim's Process*. "In neither ... does the actual story pretend to be a relation of fact; in its *literal* meaning, the whole tale is a fiction; the *allegorical* meaning is the true story." *Inferno* 12.

32 Sayers *Inferno* 12.

33 Sayers *Inferno* 13.

34 Caselli 2.

which features the *Cantica* is defined by an element of negation rather than by one of generative transformation: the transitoriness which is conveyed is a process defined by the negation to return to assume a stable, fixed form.<sup>35</sup> The fundamental reason for this is to be found in the firm Christian belief on which the *Comedy* is constructed, that is the dualism body-soul, a hierarchical separation of the composition of the human subject which implies a rigorous recognition of what constitute identity. According to Caroline Walker Bynum, an eminent American Medievalist, the body-soul dualism merges into the vision of the “self as a psychosomatic unity.”<sup>36</sup>

In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elam points out a decisive element of difference between the mode of signifying of literature and that of theatre. According to the critic, “theatre is able to draw upon the most primitive form of signification, known in philosophy as *ostension* ... which materializes the dramatic subject and his world by asserting their identity with an actual body and an actual space.”<sup>37</sup> In his view, the deictic reference to the body which can be acted out by literature is always defined by the frame of an “elsewhere”<sup>38</sup>, a dimension opposed to that of the constraints of space and time which the spectator's body endures in the present time of theatrical performance. The deictic operation of *ostension* described by Elam<sup>39</sup> has the function of stating specific presences during a theatrical event, of defining the roles and the positions of the subjects which participate in such experience.

The peculiarity of the Beckettian dramatic oeuvre, an element which is particularly developed in the three works which will be analysed, is the extent with which the position of the spectator is questioned in correspondence with that of the actor/character. The metatheatrical language of these plays questions the uncanny, disturbing nature of the performances themselves as well as the dispositions of the subjects participating to it. As opposed to the Christian moralistic sense that Dante displays by following a model of didascalie, exemplary rendition of his characters, Beckett's dramatic figures are not

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35 This is justified by the allegorical nature of the poem. As Sayers reports “ although the *literal story* of the *Comedy* is a true one, and on the characters in it are real people, the poem is nevertheless an allegory. The literal meaning is only there for the sake of the truth which it symbolizes, and the real environment within which all the events take place is the human soul” *Inferno* 14.

36 Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western christianity* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1995) 11.

37 Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of theatre and drama* (London : Methuen, 1980 ) 19.

38 “The states of affairs ... described in novels are at an evident remove from the stipulator’s or reader’s immediate context, so much so that classical narrative is always oriented towards an explicit *there* and *then*, towards an imaginary ‘elsewhere’ set in the past and which has to be evoked for the reader through predication and description.” Elam *The Semiotics of theatre and drama* 67.

39 Elam discusses *deixis* in the Chapter “Dramatic Discourse”, 85.

brought to an identifiable existential unity as well as they are not brought to be recognised with specific types of dramatic characters, charged with a stable moral, psychological value. On the contrary, as is it evident from the inconclusiveness of their speeches, in light of the obsessiveness with which they express the vulnerability of their condition, they do not emerge as figures with a recognisable identity, but rather, they extend the indefiniteness of their characterization to the spectator, who is constantly reminded of the precariousness and questionableness of the modes and the function of his/ her presence. Whose bodies are damned to judgement and constriction in Beckett's theatre? The actor's in funereal, harsh conditions that we find in *Play*, *Not-I*, and *Footfalls* or on the contrary, the audience's exposed to such display of miserable human torment and accused of voyeuristic desire?

### 3. *Play*: the Spectator's Eye versus the Actor's Mouth

#### 3.1 Contextualization and Genesis of the Work

Written in English between 1962 and 1963 and first performed in 1963, *Play* comes after a period in which Samuel Beckett experiments his dramatic language with innovative and unconventional uses of voice, sound, light and stage image. Engaging with different media and with the possibilities of disembodied presence they offered and inspired by models of musical structure, he modulates different forms of dramatic texts which combine an utter reduction of the visual elements with a multiplication of the expressive usages of sound and vice-versa. This idea is most evidently applied in the radio and in the television plays, but such operational principle is a peculiar trait of Beckett's minimalistic style and it features, in different ways, the majority of his dramatic works.<sup>40</sup>

With regard to theatre, if the interplay between scenographic minimalism and the experimentation with the technology of sound is inaugurated by the presentation of the multiple identities put on stage by *Krapp's Last Tape*, it is with *Play* that the Beckettian minimalistic aesthetic sees its establishment. As James Knowlson notes in his extensive biographical work on the dramatist, the various collaboration Beckett made with directors willing to stage *Play* made emerge technical factors and aspects that inspired him and merged into the creation of his later works, which explore more and more the relationship between the object to be represented on stage and the technical means functional to such purpose. It is so that the function and the quality of stage lighting is emphasized as a forceful means for the creation of dramatic expression and manipulation.

... his detailed work on *Play* had also brought him into hands-on contact with the technology of theatre, raising problems as to what lighting could or could not achieve. This contact, together with the fascination of watching his 'talking heads' at close quarters, pouring out their torrents of sound, was probably a key factor in inspiring later plays like *Not I*, *That Time*, *Footfalls* and *Catastrophe* in which

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<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Kalb gives a detailed discussion of Beckett's Radio and Television Plays in his essay "The Mediated Quixote: the radio and television plays, and *Film*." *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

the theatrical spotlight plays such a crucial role.<sup>41</sup>

The atmosphere and the sense of circularity which typify *Play* are highly resonant with some of the characteristics of the Dantean afterlife. The gloomy visual minimalism of the work, a one-act play in which the heads of the three characters emerge from three urns dominating a stage surrounded by a darkness broken only by the action of a spotlight and intermittently directed to one of the three, or alternatively, to all of them simultaneously, recalls a number of ambiances of the upper region of *Hell*. More precisely, considering the sensory conditions derived by the postures and by the mutual positions the three characters occupy, together with the content of the story which they conjure up once the spotlight urges them to speak, it emerges that the state in which these figures are put reflect the corporeal identifications of a group of sinners which are distributed in different Cantos of *Inferno*: In *Play*, M's act of infidelity starts a chain of reactions which subordinate reason and individual integrity to the selfish appetites and to the instincts of the body, which encompass lust, fraud and violent wrath. According to the classification of guilt provided by Dante,<sup>42</sup> these passions are conceived as Sins of Incontinence. The first part of this chapter illustrates and discusses how Beckett renders them at both textual and theatrical level while the second part, based on a meaningful analysis provided by the critic Robert Lawley, focuses on the metatheatrical language which *Play* achieves.

### 3.2 *Inferno* revisited: *Play*' s Renegotiation of the Circles of Incontinence

Firstly, the general character of the renegotiation that *Play* makes of the medieval masterpiece can be examined in terms of an economy of representation. From a broad perspective in fact, both texts effort to achieve a certain knowledge and understanding of the human nature: while Dante is willing to convey a message with universal validity via a schematic systematization of sins and sinners accompanied by the specific story and by the unambiguous judgement of the figures he encounters, in *Play* Beckett approaches universality via anonymity and doubt.

The narrative of *Play* presents a plot of love and betrayal. Reflecting the positions in which the urns are organized, M is bound to two women, W1 and W2, whose existences

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<sup>41</sup> Knowlson 518.

<sup>42</sup>“Dante's classification of sins is based chiefly on Aristotle, with a little assistance from Cicero ...” Sayers, *Inferno* 139.

come into contact because of M's affair with the latter and consequent infidelity to the former, his wife. Their individual speeches and the Choruses - moments when they are called to speak simultaneously over each other - build up a story whose specific plot and authenticity cannot be asserted. This is due to the fact that the three have evidently distinct if not antagonist points of view on the vicissitudes regarding their triangle, as it is reflected by the positions they occupy on stage which emphasize the interconnectedness and at the same time, the separateness of their points of view. The urns are in fact touching, but the faces cannot see each other inasmuch as they are frozen in a motionless posture, staring straight to the audience. Driven by jealousy and possessiveness, M, W1 and W2, finish to threaten violence to each other, to the point that we are led to think that the death of M may be acted out by a vengeful homicide if not by his voluntary choice to commit suicide. The truth about this fact cannot be asserted because of the obscure, elliptical, disconnected quality of the characters' speeches.

The use of a blazing, investigative light which exposes and aggravates the consumed state of their faces, and which obliges them to utter as automatic reaction is not the only factor which gives to their speech the character of confession, of enforced interrogation. In fact, even if the content of their discourses is very much expressed in form of a (deficient) chronicle, relating the development of a situation by the description of some of the salient events that took place, their reports are vague, faltering and discontinuous, so that the spectator and the reader cannot be able to reconstruct the specific story involving them. As it is deductible from the abstract, schematic names given to the characters and from the undistinguishable features of their faces, Beckett constructs a thematization of the typical plot of love and treason which retains the quality of the impersonal, and therefore universal value- a sense which is nevertheless constantly overturned by the insistence of the spotlight at trying to individuate some specific truth in them.

Deictic confusion and referential incoherence<sup>43</sup> marks the quality of the verbal performances of the characters. The following lines uttered tonelessly by M, consist in a dialogue which plays on the creation of a confusion in identifying and distinguishing the reciprocal positions of the characters with respect to this specific period and within the story in general. This is due to the pervasive condition of doubtfulness which M's founding act of infidelity has scattered.

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43 The expression "referential incoherence" is formed in opposition to what Keir Elam defines as the "Referential Coherence" of a dramatic text: "the necessity of creating and maintaining a consistent universe of discourse whose elements the audience can readily identify entails a limited and more or less stable range of dramatic referents whose properties are maintained, otherwise indicated". *The Semiotics of theatre and Drama* 112.

M: The next thing was the scene between them. I can't have her crashing in here, she said, threatening to take my life. I must have looked incredulous. Ask Erskine, she said, if you don't believe me. But she threatens to take her own, I said. Not yours? She said. No, I said, hers. We had fun trying to work this out.<sup>44</sup>

As we can see from the quoted passage, a nihilistic sarcasm underscores the cruel anonymity of *Play's* spectacularization of human torment. This can be observed, for example, by the consideration that the instantaneous, gloomy impact released by image set on stage combines with a sense of absurdity and awkwardness inspired by the odd conditions in which we find these figures, which is heightened by the spotlight placed on them. The emergence of a sense of strident ambiguity during the performance, is also given by the fact that the reality of the action on stage is far removed from the accounts reported by the subjects. In fact, despite the evident expired or at least, suspended status of the characters which the severe presence of the urns suggests, the story which is being reported revolves around sex, appetite and revenge, impulses based on the liberation of corporeal instincts which are irrevocably nullified by the very negation that these bodies suffer. The result of such scenographic operation is that what is rendered visible is the absence of the body, the negation of its wholeness and of the possibility of movement, an element which works in opposition to the eventful -yet desultory- nature of the anecdotes that the characters report.

Moreover, the impossibility to find an univocal solution to the enigmas of the plot and to distribute the appropriate individual guilt to three figures is heightened by the fast tempo and by the cacophonous use of voice that the dramatist organizes. When the three characters utter their individual lines over each other, they create an effect of unintelligibility which echoes back to the failure of finding an harmony or at least, an accord during their earthly experience. Inasmuch as this happens when the spotlight illuminates them simultaneously, an effect of synchronism and of discord is created, which runs parallel to the realization that if on the one hand the perception of light provides the possibility of expression, and so in a sense, the liberation from the immobility which forces

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<sup>44</sup>Samuel Beckett, "Play" *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 309-310. All future page references to Beckett's texts will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

the figures on stage, on the other hand such delivery of inner expression is nothing but torture for the characters. This all may suggest that the only existential certainty we can grasp consists in the experience of instability and transition. In Martin Esslin's view

in *Play* it is probably the impossibility of an extinction of consciousness through death itself that is dramatized: as the individual can never become aware of his own cessation, his final moments of consciousness must remain, as it were, eternally suspended in limbo and can be conceived as recurring through all eternity.<sup>45</sup>

Like the resolute divine and poetic authorities of the *Comedy*, Beckett achieves the configuration of a *contrappasso* law: who in life has exceeded the boundaries of a given moral and social order, is now suppressed and afflicted by the enforcement to relate his/her corporeal sins to an audience. Therefore, Beckett adopts the principle of movement which characterizes the *Inferno*: it is conceived both in terms of necessity and inevitability inasmuch as it belongs to a body that cannot subtract from the perception and the expression of his/her conditions, even though no possibility of substantial change is envisaged.

In contrast with Dante, Beckett does not offer the reader (and the spectator) a portrayal or a particular judgement of the characters. By the textual allusions to the parts of the body and to sensory perceptions, the dramatist builds an eloquent rendition of the scenario of corporeal liberation and excess causing the deadly and tortured condition of the three characters, which we can compare with those of the sinners of Incontinence.

Firstly, given the central theme of the play, an evident association with the circle of the Lustful emerges. Reporting Dante's verses, the figures located in this circle are "the sinners who make their reason/ Bond thrall under the yoke of their lust" (*Inferno, Canto V, 38-39*). Among them, Dante is captured by the vision of two lovers drifting hand in hand, struggling against "the blast of hell that never rests from whirling" (*Inferno, Canto V, 31-32*). Similarly to the plot of *Play*, the story of these two characters is about a love

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<sup>45</sup> Martin Esslin, ed. *Samuel Beckett: a collection of critical essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1987) 7.

triangle and a murder: Francesca da Rimini felt in love with Paolo Malatesta, the brother of her husband Gianciotto Malatesta, who surprised them together and stabbed them both to death.<sup>46</sup> Being asked to tell their story, the lovers relive their memories and remember their transgression as well as the tender moments which they shared together: what in life responded to the instinct and to passion of the body, becomes object of rationalization via the verbal act. In *Play*, the torment which accompanies such process is resonant with the sense of the words uttered by Francesca,<sup>47</sup> “the bitterest woe of woes/ is to remember in our wretchedness/ old happy times ...” (*Inferno*, Canto V, 121-123), even if the circumstances presented by the dramatic work evokes practically no happiness, but rather an anxious desire for an amelioration and for a relaxation that neither death will provide.

In the *Inferno* the kind of punishment given to the manifestations of a lack of moral, corporeal self-constraint accompanied by an excess of self-indulgence, consists in forcing painful containment to the body and to the expressive channels with which it is provided. The Wrathful, are in fact submerged in the obscure muddy waters of the Styx, from which only their heads emerge, together with the crooked sound coming from their voices.

Bogged there they say: “Sullen were we – we took  
 No joy of the pleasant air, no joy of the good  
 Sun: our hearts smouldered with a sulky smoke;

Sullen we lie here now in the black mud”  
 This hymn they gurgle in their throats, for whole  
 Words they can nowise frame.

(*Inferno*, Canto VII, 121-126)

The interrupted sound coming from them, recalls a type of castigation which is also inflicted to the figures of *Play*. The intermittent, discontinuous action of the spotlight, going on and off their faces, forces and orders the delivery of the characters' speech according to a discontinuous but obsessive pattern which negates the continuity and the possibility of coherence of their confessions as well as the peace and the suspension which

<sup>46</sup> Sayers 102.

<sup>47</sup> Like the plot of *Play*, the story of Francesca da Polenta is about a love triangle and a murder. Francesca felt in love with Paolo Malatesta, the brother of his husband, who stabbed them both to death. Sayers comments on the characters and their story. *Inferno* 102.

darkness temporarily offers them.

The description of the landscape of disarming anonymity that opens up in front of Dante when he enters the circle where the Heretics are buried and piled into scorching tombs (*Inferno*, Canto X) is directed to nullify the specificity of the bodies hosting intellects which did not submit and accept the order of the Catholic Church. Between them, we find an order of heresy whose conditions can be associated with those of the characters of *Play*: not believing in the immortality of the soul, the Epicureans lived according to a philosophy of presence and of exaltation of the materiality of the body. The bitter punishment which they must endure in light of the discovery that the soul and the body transcend the limits of mortal life, is the very debasement of the particularity of their bodies, which are now amassed within the same tomb and whose shapes undergo a pitiless spectacularization,<sup>48</sup> as Dante clearly delivers in his narrative, where the curiosity about the state of these figures is expressed in terms of a “keen desire”.

O sovran power, that though the impious gyres”,  
said I, “dost wheel me as thou deemest well,  
speak to me, satisfy my keen desires.

Those that find here their fiery burial,  
May they be seen? For nothing they seems concealed;  
The lids are raised, and none stands sentinel”.

And he “All these shall be shut fast and sealed  
When from Jehoshaphat they come anew,  
Bringing their bodies now left far afield

And hereabouts lie buried, close in view,  
Epicure and his followers – they who hold  
That when the body dies the soul dies too ... ”

(*Inferno* , Canto X, 4-15)

In line with this, Beckett conceives *Play* as a spectacularization of the torment hunting the

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48 See Picture 1.

characters, which are put on stage without any possibility of movement except for the one which envisages the constriction to speak about their guilty memories. Even more, associating the presence of the audience with the function of the spotlight, the element which practically allows and directs the attention on a specific character, and transforming the tombs in urns and the amassed bodies in three trapped bodies with protruding heads located at the centre of a stage,<sup>49</sup> Beckett exposes and criticizes the voyeuristic gaze, that “keen desire” which distinguishes the theatrical exchange between audience and stage.

An environmental element of the circles where the sinners of Incontinence are punished which seems to bear some importance for how Beckett treats corporeality in his work, regards the olfactory qualities which characterise them. Approximating the river Phlegeton, Dante repeatedly reports with words the strong, vile smell that defines the location given to the characters whose corporeal corruption and greed polluted their integrity.<sup>50</sup> In *Play*, the nose and the perception of odours are linked with sexuality and doubt. The body of the traitor retains the traces of his immoral behaviour, an association which Beckett exploits at both corporeal and figurative level, as this series of expressions shows: ; “.. I smell you off him, she screamed, he stinks of bitch...” (308) ; “ then I began to smell her off him again” (311). In the *Comedy*, the cause of the ubiquitous smell which reins in the circles where the sinners of violent passion are located, are the fumes coming from the bloody waters of the Phlegeton where the violent are plunged forever.<sup>51</sup> Commenting on the tragic fate destined to these sinners of violent passion, Dante depicts this impulse as an urgency imposing itself onto the presence and the materiality of our body, as a torment which will never extinguish and which will finish to take possession of ourselves. “Oh blind, O rash and wicked lust of spoil/ that drives our short life with so keen a goad / And steeps our life eternal in such broil” (*Inferno*, Canto XII, 49-51).

The image and the sensory qualities which “broil” evokes, reminds the sense of intermittent but obsessive stimulation that the spotlight is playing on the characters of *Play*, a movement which hints as well to the sexual greed which persecutes them. In this sense, the connection between sexuality and doubt relates to the perceptions of the nose inasmuch as the odour which the betrayer retains stimulates the suspicion and the wrath of the betrayed. Moreover, in light of the suspended doubt that a killing has been

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49 The analogy between the landscape of the circle of the Heretics and the stage image of *Play* is showed, for example by a film adaptation of the play directed by Anthony Minghella in 2001. Behind the three urns of the characters, extends a field full of identical urns with protruding heads. *Play*, prod. Blue Angels Films, Film Four, RTÉ., Tyrone Productions, dir. Anthony Minghella, 2001.

50 This can be observed at the end of Canto X (133-136) and in Canto XI (9-12). See 2.2 of this thesis.

51 Sayers 146.

committed by one (or more) of *Play's* characters, it is interesting to note that in the *Inferno* the murderers are drowned till their throats in the blood-boling water of the Phlegeton, like M , W1 and W2 in their urns.

In *Play* the report of the corporeal urgencies of the characters serves the creation of a dualism marked by the contrast between the negation, by constriction, of the wholeness of the body and between the content of the speech that the mouths utter, describing the details of its excesses. Such image of immobility by constriction hinges on a principle of specularity. Such trapped condition mirrors the incapability of the characters to contain their sexual and violent passion: possessiveness and will of imposition possess the subject and denies him/ her reason and autonomy of movement.

### **3.3 Speech versus Gaze, Mouth versus Eye: the Relationship between the Stage and the Audience**

In his work on the semiotics of theatre, Elam explains the codes of behaviour generally assumed in theatrical communication. They regulate the exchanges between the different subjective positions which participate to the theatrical experience.

The theatregoer will accept that, at least in dramatic representations, an alternative and fictional reality is to be presented by individuals designated as the performers, and that his own role with respect to that represented reality is to be that of a privileged 'onlooker'—'The central understanding is that the audience has neither the right nor the obligation to participate directly in the dramatic action occurring on the stage' (Goffman ... ). This definitional constraint, whereby the actors' and spectators' roles are distinguished and the levels of reality (dramatic versus theatrical) are conventionally established, is the crucial axiom in the theatrical frame ... this firm cognitive division is usually reinforced by symbolic spatial or temporal boundary markers or 'brackets'—the stage, the dimming of the lights, the curtain, the banging of wooden clappers (as in Chinese theatre), etc.—which allow a more precise definition of what is included in and what is excluded

from the frame in space and time.<sup>52</sup>

In *Play*, the points explained by the passage quoted above, are destabilized when the characters stop to talk about their private issues and turn the attention to their relationship with the audience, by the use of stage lighting which Beckett articulates and by the sense of perpetuity which the circular structure of the work presents, whose end seems to return to the beginning of the performance. *Play's* critique to the conventions of theatre works at both visual and textual level.

The oddity of the figures which appear on stage emerges in light of the separation between the human and the material part, a scenographic strategy which underlines the borders between the part of the body to which perception is negated and the one which must face it. As a result, when we are permitted to grasp them, not only eyes and mouths become the centre of attention of the performance but also, they emerge as the units through which, despite everything, the characters are still able to express a part of their individuality. Since their bodies are constricted and their faces cannot turn,<sup>53</sup> what they can perceive of themselves and of the other characters, which they cannot see even though the urns are touching, is just the sound of their voices speaking. In fact, the visual perception they have of the space in front of them is practically blank, inasmuch as the light illuminates their faces from below and enables the audience to visualize them but not the contrary. Presumably what the actors can see, is the just the tip of their noses.

Craving for peace, for an absence of perception which death didn't give them, eyes and mouth of the characters are what is offered as object of perception and visualization to the audience, but they are nevertheless channels which supply some kind of defence against this voyeuristic attack. In the "Meditation"<sup>54</sup> section of the play, the speech of the characters seems to be engaging directly with the audience, which is identified with the automatic, intermittent movement of the spotlight and simultaneously alluded to as a human component by the citation of the parts of the body with which it relates with the figures on stage.

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52 Elam *The Semiotics of theatre and Drama* 54. In the passage the critic quotes Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.)

53 The sense of fixity with Beckett conceives the posture of the characters is clearly expressed in the stage directions: "... the neck held fast in the urn's mouth." Beckett 307.

54 Paul Lawley "Stages of identity: from *Krapp's last tape* to *Play*." *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*. Ed. John Pilling (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 100.

M: And now, that you are ... mere eye. Just looking. At my face. On and off.

W1 :Weary of playing with me. Get off me. Yes.

M: Looking for something. In my face. Some truth. In my eyes. Not even.

M: Mere eye. No mind. Opening and shutting on me. Am I as much- Am I as much as ... being seen?

(Beckett, 317)

As we can see, the voyeurism for which M blames the audience is conceived as an act devoid of sense and functionality, not only because there is no possibility for a truth to emerge, but also in light of the reciprocal sensory stimulation which unites actors and audience during the theatrical performance. Such exchange is expressed in terms of antagonism and torture, as a constriction that the two parts exercise on each other.

In fact, if on the one hand the characters are the object of the gaze of the audience, on the other hand their position retains the advantage of verbal expression. From this perspective, the voices of the actors express some kind of scepticism over a sharp distinction between their conditions and those of the spectators: the invitation to reflect on the differences between their reciprocal positions, has the effect of a call for sympathy and an identification that would make the two get closer even if still in opposition. In this light, the image of the urn with just the head emerging from it, can be interpreted as reflecting the seat occupied by the spectator during the performance from the actors' point of view: immobilized in the role they chose for the theatrical experience, the spectators sit in their anonymous places as the characters are enclosed in their anonymous urns. If we consider the following words, uttered by M not only as speech directed to himself, but also to the spectators, those places to “sit in” and “compare”, can refer both to the position of the two figures sharing the stage with him and to the one occupied by the audience: “Meet, and sit, now in the one dear place, now in the other, and sorrow together, and compare [hiccup.] pardon- happy memories”(314).

Nevertheless, reading the stage direction that Beckett left, a significant difference emerges between the posture of the spectator and that of the actor. The actors of *Play* are in fact meant to kneel or alternatively stand behind the urns. “The sitting posture results in urns of unacceptable bulk and it not to be considered”(319). The presence in the play of a deliberate metatheatrical confrontation and discussion of the roles, the positions and the

postures of the spectators and of the actors, can be observed for example by the following words uttered by M, “I pity them in any case, yes, compare my lot with theirs, however blessed, and -”(315). From the point of view of the audience, the effect of interpreting these words as directed to them and not just necessarily the other figures on stage, is heightened by the fact that the faces cannot see each other, but stare directly in front of them.

Although in the stage directions Beckett refers to the characters as “victims” and to the light as to the “unique inquisitor” of the performance,<sup>55</sup> as Lawley suggests, this relationship is not a fixed one and it subverted by the recognition that “the light *shares* the predicament of the figures it tortures”.<sup>56</sup> The function of the spotlight, enforcing perception and more specifically, self-perception and consequent expression to the characters, goes beyond the symbolism of light as divine, authoritative presence and intervention (as the evocation of an afterlife dimension calls for). In fact, it also points to the relationship of reciprocal provocation that the spectators and the characters exercise on each other.

The investigative action of the light, insisting on trying to seek some truth in the story, a specific role and a specific guilt, operates in contrast to the circular yet irregular structural pattern of the play. Moreover, Lawley makes an important observation with regard to such discontinuous movement and to the fixity of the characters on stage. He suggests that

the metaphorical linkage between the operation of the light and sexual activity hints at the significance of the story the three heads tell, each from its own viewpoint, in what Beckett termed the ‘Narration’ section of the text ... it is, after all, a story about a man *going back* to one woman, then to another, seemingly unable to *leave* either.<sup>57</sup>

Subsequently, the intermittent movement of the spotlight which articulates the development of the performance, stands for the formal measure of the existential, phenomenological analysis the dramatist has conceived through this work: the individual, continuously affected by external stimuli is unable to withdraw from self-perception an obliged to express. In Lawley's words, “the force which obliges its victims to speak is also

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55 Such expressions are used in Beckett's indications for the use of stage lighting, 318.

56 Lawley 102.

57 Lawley 100-101.

obliged *to* them for their response, because it is itself mysteriously obliged by some *other* force”.<sup>58</sup>

In conclusion, the contrast and the interplay between distinct and oppositional forces and presences during the performance - the movable light identified with the gaze of audience versus the immobility and the speech of the characters- can be reported to the discussion of the relationship of reciprocal stimulation at play between the activity of the eyes and that of the mouth. Indeed, the thematization of the centrality of the mouth for the expression of individuality is rendered in light of an external fixation on its movement and activity, and it is rendered by the provocative interrogations which the figures on stage pronounce.

“Is it something I should do with my face than than utter? Weep?”

“ Bite off my tongue and swallow it? Spit it out? Would that placate you? How the mind works still to be sure!”

(314)

The sense of fragmentariness conveyed by these lines consist in the reduction of the value of the characters to a series of facial movements and in the identification of the presence of the spectator with that of a perverse, capricious eye. Setting a relationship of antagonism between eyes and mouth and reporting how the latter is visualized by an external gaze, the fastidious, analytic quality of the words quoted above emphasizes the sense of anonymity and depersonalization which distinguishes the figures on stage. Negated of the possibility of movement and their torments exposed as an exemplary spectacle on stage, the characters speak about themselves and to the audience as to bodies devoid of sense and unity.

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<sup>58</sup> Lawley 103.

## 4. *Not I* between Damnation and Purgation

### 4.1 Contextualization and Genesis of the Work

If *Play* presents the afterlife of three individuals who during their earthly existence could not renounce their corporeal instincts, trying despite bad consequences to satisfy their desires and appetites, with *Not I* we land on an opposite psychological territory: the figure concealed behind Mouth, is not able to realize, accept and affirm the totality of her experience and perception as belonging to her individuality. While the three voices of *Play* defend themselves from the assertive gaze of the theatrical light and of the audience - which threaten to objectify and judge their private experiences- by accusing them of perversion, the voice of *Not I* performs a soliloquy which negates the possibility of fixing an identity for the obscured presence which is on stage: if it is negated from the very beginning, there is no subjectivity to be twisted into a passive object of perception. Through her discourse, Mouth, illuminated and visible in its parts and movements, objectifies herself: Mouth speaks to herself as if she was not her, *Not I*. But which force has the upper-hand? Which type of language is more forceful? The voyeuristic specificity with which Mouth can be seen and fixed or the discursive evasiveness from identity and external objectification that she carries out?

Written and first performed in 1982, *Not I* is a short but frenetic piece, whose intensity is defined by the iconic presences<sup>59</sup> put on stage and by the type of dramatic action they conjure up, which in light of the general fixity and stability of the positions and of the spaces they occupy, makes the smallest gesture magnified and momentous. This play is one of the most avantgardist theatrical experimentation that Beckett realized. As it has been discussed by various eminent critics, Beckett's contiguity to avantgardist movements such as Dada and Surrealism generally emerges in light of the iconoclastic language they share<sup>60</sup>. As regards *Not I*, Enoch Brater suggests that it "shares its use of an isolated mouth

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59 Keir Elam gives an explanation of the role of the *icon* in theatre which conveys the directness and the openness of its mode of signification. "An icon is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses ... the notion of iconism is useful, therefore, provided that two main qualifications are kept in mind. First, the principle of similitude is highly flexible and strictly founded on convention ... allowing the spectator to make the necessary analogy between the standing-for and the stood-for objects, whatever the actual material or structural equivalence between them. Second, even in the most literal iconic sign-functions ... the similarity puts into play [is] not a simple one-to-one relationship between analogous objects but a relationship necessarily mediated by the signified class or concept ... so that anything which permits the spectator to form an image or likeness of the represented object can be said to have fulfilled an iconic function." *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* 14-16.

60 Important discussions of Beckett's relationship with avant-garde are provided by Daniel Albright in

with the amputated body parts of Tzara's play *The Gas Heart* (1921).”<sup>61</sup>

Mouth surrounded by darkness and faintly illuminated from close-up, recites her speech in a toneless but feverish tone, which results in an obsessive verbal delivery and in the spectacularization of the articulatory movements to which the uttered words correspond. The darkness which isolates Mouth, highlights the composite nature of the organ responsible for verbal expression. Nevertheless, given the minimum distance which normally separates the stage from the audience and because of the fastness of Mouth's speech, the spectator strives to see and understand the details of the image and of the oral articulation on stage : from the point of view of the spectator Mouth's performance is marked by indistinctness and obscurity. Moreover, the impersonal tone required from the actress' voice intensifies the sense of evasiveness related to Mouth 's inability to state her identity.

Downstage left, there is a figure whose wholeness can be grasped but not seen in its particularity. Auditor is integrally covered by a black djellaba, and its figure is fully illuminated. Staring motionless to the character on stage and raising and lowering the arms “in a gesture of helpless compassion”(475), the presence of Auditor builds up a chiasmic composition together with Mouth, where the former stands as the visualization of the latter's negated wholeness. The impassive, phlegmatic quality of Auditor`s schematic movements, automatically reacting to the vehement formula through which Mouth rejects her subjective identification “ ... what? ... who? ... no! ...she!” (377), stands at the opposite pole of the unpredictable, impulsive movements that the organ performs.

The genesis of the play has been discussed by James Knowlson in terms of the visual inspirations that brought Beckett to the configuration of the isolated character of Mouth and to the obscure presence of Auditor. In *Damned to Fame*, the critic makes an association between an experience that Beckett made during a trip to Morocco - the encounter with a solitary figure completely covered in a djellaba- and the author's fascination for Caravaggio's painting *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*.

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*Beckett and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), by Enoch Brater in *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's late style in the theater* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) and by *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*. ed. S. E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

61 Peter Fifield, “Samuel Beckett and the inter-war Avant-Garde.” *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*. ed. S. E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) 171.

What probably happened is that the image of the djellaba-clad figure coalesced with his sharp memories of the Caravaggio painting. For perhaps even more striking than the partially disembodied head of John the Baptist in the Caravaggio are the watching figures. Most powerful of all is an old woman standing to Salome's left. She observes the decapitation with horror, covering her ears rather than her eyes. This old woman emerges as the figure in Caravaggio's masterpiece whose role comes closest to the Auditor in Beckett's play, reacting compassionately to what he/she hears.<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, in his essay "Dead Heads: damnation-narration in the dramaticules" Elam brilliantly proves the Dantean genealogy of *Not I*. The play in fact stages the invasion of individuality, the transgression of its psychic and physical space by reflecting the dispositions of the figures portrayed in Bocca degli Abati's<sup>63</sup> episode of Canto XXXII of *Inferno* (which will be discussed in detail in the next pages). In Elam's view, Mouth is identified with Bocca - the Italian word for "mouth" - and the Auditor can be comparable either to Dante or Virgil, who stare at Bocca's tormented condition. During the dialogue that takes place between Dante and Bocca, Virgil stands silently and observes the behaviour of the poet, who, since in canto XX had been reproached for showing compassion towards the Sorcerers, is now expected to show pitilessness.<sup>64</sup>

If the auditor shares the early compassion of Dante, there is some suggestion that Beckett attributes the pitilessness of Virgil and of the later Dante to the audience. The second auditor-spectator present, in the playhouse, not only remains immobile before the spectacle, but continues to tranfix the sinner with his relentless gaze ...<sup>65</sup>

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62 Knowlson 589.

63 Sayers provides a presentation of this figure in her commentary to Canto XXXII. "Bocca degli Abati was a Ghibelline ... he fought on the Guelf side and, at the most critical moment, came treacherously up behind the standard-bearer of the Florentine cavalry and cut off his hand, bringing down the standard and throwing the Florentines into a panic which lost the day." *Inferno* 276.

64 Elam *Dead Heads* 154.

65 Elam 154.

Therefore, the three *characters* of the Infernal episode are transposed into theatre, where the spectator assists to a dramatization of the relationship at play between the actor and the spectator. In fact, the former is put on a stage, expected to reveal something and inspected by the fixing gaze and the expectations of the spectator which remains hidden, wrapped in anonymity as the Auditor is wrapped in black. Through the Auditor's gestures the members of the audience may visualize themselves in their role and position during the performance, helpless and distant. In fact in Dante's text, during the dialogue between Bocca and the poet, Virgil does not take an active role. His presence with respect to Dante is that of a teacher, not only guiding, but also examining and judging the movements and the words of his disciple. From this specific perspective, Virgil becomes the absolute judge and observer of the whole scene, as the audience is during the performance.

In his analysis of the play, Enoch Brater sees Mouth's negated identity as a "third-person scapegoat".<sup>66</sup> Moreover, he observes that

the staging of the play suggests both a religious confessional -Auditor's attentive cowed figure, the mouth pouring out words while the rest of the face remains hidden hidden in the darkness- and also a literally dislocated personality: an old woman listening to herself, yet unable to accept that what she hears, what she says, refers to her.<sup>67</sup>

In these terms, if we interpret the play as a dramatization of a "trial" played at both individual and public level, we can see the flow of Mouth's speech as an hesitant, yet compulsory confession, which is nevertheless never fully complete, as Mouth will never say the elemental yet most difficult diphthong epitomizing subjectivity, I. From a metatheatrical perspective, the negation and the ambiguity around which the performance is constructed, point to a destabilization of the conventionally assumed positions derived by theatrical system of deictic reference. In fact, according to Elam,

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<sup>66</sup> Enoch Brater, "The 'I' in Beckett's Not I." *Twentieth Century Literature* Vol. 20, No. 3. July 1974:190.

<sup>67</sup> Brater 93. The idea expressed by Brater is confirmed by the positions in which the actress interpreting Mouth is supposed to stand: harnessed, blindfolded and unable to move with the body pressed against the wooden panel, as the actress Lisa Dwan explains in a short documentary produced by the BBC in 2013. *Lisa Dwan explains Beckett's play*, prod. BBC, 2103. 2 min. 53 sec.

it is on the 'pronominal drama' between the I-speaker and the you-listener/addressee that the dramatic dialectic is constructed ... dramatic discourse is egocentric: the speaking subject defines everything (including the you addressee) in terms of his own place in the dramatic world.<sup>68</sup>

The relationship between the antithetical types of presence that Mouth and Auditor represent can be explored both in terms of antagonism or of compassion by considering the Dantean references from which they are inspired. The paragraphs which follow are devoted to the consideration of the manner in which Beckett's play renegotiates the dialogues and the events treated in two cantos of two different Canticas of Comedy: Canto XXXII of *Inferno*, as identified and discussed by Keir Elam, and Canto XXXI of *Purgatorio*. The aim is to explore how Beckett is able to combine, essentialize and put into question the central motif which unites the two Cantos and to create a performance which combines a dominant sense of repression to moments of irrational, uncontrolled yearn for liberation. In fact, even though the episodes that will be analysed correspond to different stages in the course of the path that Dante undertakes towards knowledge and salvation, they nevertheless revolve around the same issue, the inspection and confession of individual guilts and actions. Such topic is differently rendered according to the obstacles Dante is forced to overcome in order to proceed through the territories he is crossing.

#### **4.2 Mouth's Confession in Canto XXXII of *Inferno* and Canto XXXI of *Purgatorio***

In Canto XXXII of *Inferno* Dante is walking in the second region of the Ninth Circle, Antenora, where the betrayers of their own country are plunged to the neck on the frozen lake Cocytus when he steps on the head of Bocca degli Abati, who laments the bad treatment that the poet gives him.

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68 Elam *The Semiotics of theatre and Drama* 87-88.

The master stopped; and while the shade let loose  
Volleys of oaths: “Who art thou, cursing so  
And treating people to such foul abuse?”

Said I; and he: “Nay, who art thou, to go  
Through Antenora, kicking people's faces?  
Thou might'st be living, 'twas so shrewd a blow”.

“Living I am,” said I; “do thou sing praises  
For that; if thou seek fame; I'll give thee it,  
Writing thy name with other notable cases.”

“All I demand is just the opposite;  
Be off, and pester me no more” he said.  
“To try such wheedling here shows little wit”.

At that I grasped the scruff behind his head:  
“Thou'lt either tell thy name, or have thy hair  
Stripped from thy scalp, “ I panted, “shred by shred”.  
“Pluck it all out,” said he, “I'll not declare  
My name, nor show my face, though you insist  
And break my head a thousand times, I swear”

(*Inferno*, Canto XXXII, 85-102)

In the *Inferno*, the quality of the language used by Dante adjusts itself to the depravation and the monstrosity of the scenario that he finds. According to this, since the beginning of the Canto XXXII, the poet speaks of the damned by referring to parts and fragments of their body, in order to stress the degree of moral corruption and physical distortion of the figures he meets. Such trait is particularly observable in the lines quoted above as well as by the analytic and fastidious precision with which Bocca's mouth's movements are described when another traitor, Buoso da Duera<sup>69</sup> reveals his identity to Dante: “ Hey, Bocca, what's to do?/Don't thy jaws make enough infernal clatter/But, what the devil! Must thou start barking too?”(*Inferno*, Canto XXXII, 106-108). Since “bocca” is

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69 Buoso da Duera was a Ghibelline traitor as explained by Sayers in *Inferno*, 318.

the Italian word for “mouth”, the identity between the proper name of the character and the term that describes the organ has the effect that the former becomes fully identified with the latter, and simultaneously dehumanized and dismantled in his anatomic parts.

The movements of the mouth are interestingly described as well in Canto XXXI of *Purgatorio*, which begins with the event of a confession. In the precedent Canto, almost arrived at the doors of Heaven, Dante meets Beatrice, who severely reproaches him for his conduct after her death.<sup>70</sup> She then reveals that she is the intermediary for the salvation of the poet' soul and for the path he is undertaking in the realms of the afterlife, a path to which Dante can proceed only by the remissions of his sins, to be purged by the water of the river Lethe. Beatrice conducts an interrogation during which Dante is forced to admit his guilt.

“O thou, you side the sacred stream” says she,  
Turning the sharp point of her speech my way-  
Though even the edge seemed sharp enough to me-

And thus continuing without delay;  
“Say, say if this is true; so grave a charge  
Requires thine own confession; therefore say.”

Alas!my wits were scattered so at large  
That the voice stirred, but faded and was gone  
Ere from its organs it could find discharge.

She waited; then: “What think'st thou? She went on;  
“Answer me; thy sad memories are not yet  
drowned by this water of oblivion.”

(*Purgatorio*, XXXI, 1-12)

The difficulty and heaviness of recognizing one's faults and responsibilities are expressed

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<sup>70</sup> Beatrice Portinari is the woman whom Dante Alighieri loved. She lived Florence and died at the age of 24. In the *Comedy* she is conceived as the “the God-bearing image which manifests the glory of of God in his creation, and becomes a personal sacramental experience”. Sayers *Purgatory* 311.

by the resistance and tension of Dante's mouth to express and state his misbehaviours. In this sense, the passage is analogous to the one where Bocca is put under examination, asked to reveal his identity (and therefore, his story) and thus brought to be recognized by his guilty deeds, with the difference that this time, the accused is the poet himself. In the description of the confession, verbal expression is conceived as a laborious process, acted out by the separate efforts of the body and of the facial apparatus. The poet explains the struggle to grasp the initial obscurity of his fictional character's voice and reports the hesitation of the mouth to articulate the answers, which shows a resistance to convey and produce the sounds of his regret.

Furthermore, the acts of the mouth are accompanied by the report of what the eyes do: the mouth can be recognized uttering just by the vision of the lips moving inasmuch as its sound is too insecure and almost imperceptible. As the following lines reports, through the image of the cross-bow the poet conveys a visual, "mechanic" description of the internal movement that mouth articulates in order to utter and produce sound under such duress.

Terror and shame inextricably knit  
Forced from my miserable lips a "Yes"  
Such that the sight must needs interpret it.

As a cross-bow, bended with great stress,  
Snaps, string and bow together, and the bolt  
Flies to the mark, not with more power but less,

I broke beneath the weight of this assault,  
Choking out sighs and sobs still more and more  
Till in my throat my voice died by default.

.....

After the heaving of a bitter sigh  
I scarce found my voice; but with what pains they might  
My lips contrived to fashion a reply ...

(*Purgatorio*, XXXI, 13-21;31-33)

Moreover, from the eyes come an expression of regret which is not verbal. Tears scatter from them, as an automatic reaction which runs parallel with the power and the sense of purification that the holy waters of Lethe convey: “Stop sowing tears ...” (*Purgatorio*, XXXI, 46). Indeed, if in classical Greek literature the Lethe is the river of oblivion which is located in the Hades, in the *Comedy*, “Dante retains the association of the Lethe with forgetfulness, but he adds a moral dimension by specifying that it removes only the remembrance of sins rather than all memories of a former life”<sup>71</sup>: the Lethe becomes the river of repentance and absolution. As the following quoted lines display, despite the pain through which it is accomplished, the confession has the effect of undoing an heavy burden for the speaking subject: its delivery is supposed to confer a sense of unity and moral integrity to the speaking subject.

“*Asperges me*” I heard, as I draw near  
The blissful blink, so sweetly as to drown  
Power to recall. Far more to write it here.

She stretched both hands, she seized me by the crown,  
Did that fair lady, and she plunged me in,  
So that I needs must drink the water down;

Then drew me forth and led me, washed and clean ...

(*Purgatorio*, XXXI, 97-105)

The observation of Gustave Doré’s illustrations of Bocca's interrogation in Canto XXXII of *Inferno*<sup>72</sup> and of Dante's confession in canto XXXI of *Purgatorio*,<sup>73</sup> helps us understand the distinct but somehow symmetrical nature of these two scenes of confession in Dante's text. In these pictures, the positions of the figures are similar and the

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Lansing, ed. *The Dante Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 561.

<sup>72</sup> See Picture 2.

<sup>73</sup> See Picture 3.

depiction of the landscape surrounding them evidence a connection based on contrast. Whereas in the former we see Bocca submerged in frozen waters till his neck with Dante's figure dominating over him, in a pose suggesting severity, superiority and harshness, in the latter Dante is submerged in the waters of Lethe and accompanied by the redemptive, pitiful beauty of Matelda,<sup>74</sup> who leans over him bearing his face with her hand. The presence of Virgil and of the anonymous shapes of the damned souls which populate the squalid landscape of *Hell* convey a sense of anonymity and spectacularity which stands in contrast to the atmosphere that the latter depicts: the florid nature characterizing the Purgatory hosts a soft, private scene of confession between the two figures which we see.

In sum, the first fundamental connection between Beckett's work and the two Dantean episodes is that the mouth is rendered as a figure which stands as the central expressive channel for the totality of the forces which inhabit the body of the subject, it is the organ which must bear the effort to give a sense of unity to it: mouth is expected to confess, reveal and show something to us. Brought to epitomize the identity and the moral coherence of the individual insofar as it channels his/her verbal expression, the mouth is investigated and forced to speak about those chaotic interior matters which constitute individual consciousness. Such inspection is conducted by an other, an objectifying figure which not only is waiting for an answer but also firmly staring at the indicted. This fixing gaze is what permits an obstinate observation of the very gestures and movements which accompany the verbal delivery.

Keeping in mind such polarities, we can advance the hypothesis that in *Not I*, Beckett renders both the dimension of pitiless spectacularity of the *Inferno* and the sense of intimacy of the relevant passage of the *Purgatorio*. In fact, Mouth continuously struggles with and eventually baffles the greed of the gaze and of the expectations of the spectators, who yearn to comprehend what is going on in front of them: Mouth is exposed but isolated, unwilling to reveal her identity but simultaneously expressing her interior feeling in a frenzied, irrational fashion.

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<sup>74</sup> Matelda is Beatrice's handmaid in the *Purgatory*. However, this character may be identified with Beatrice herself. For a discussion of the allegorical personifications of Beatrice see Sayers' note *Purgatory*, 302; for Sayers' interpretation of Matelda's identity see *Purgatory*, 304.

### 4.3 Mouth's Movements: Repression and Irrational Liberation

In my opinion, despite the dominant sense of oppression which is present in the performance, in *Not I*, Mouth expresses also a sense of liberation, or more precisely, a yearn for liberation, which she describes as a sudden flow of verbal expression after periods of substantial aphony “... couldn't make any sound ... not any sound ... no sound of any kind” (378). Let's now focus on the play and look at textual and theatrical strategies through which it produces such oscillation between a sense of aridity and one of liquidity, between moments of repression and others of uncontrolled stream.

After the third time Auditor moves his arms, Mouth continues her disconnected narration by evoking a scene at a courtroom,<sup>75</sup> where she seems to be asked to confess a crime or alternatively, testify to violence that she might have undergone.

.... something she had to tell- ... what ... the buzzing...dull roar... in the skull... in the beam... ferreting around ... painless ... so far ... ha!.. so far ... then thinking ... oh long after ... sudden flash ... perhaps something she had to ... tell ... could that be it? ... something she had to tell ... tiny little thing ... before its time ... godforsaken hole ... no love ... spared that ... speechless all her days ... practically speechless ...how she survived! ... that time in court ... what she had to say for herself ... guilty or not guilty ... stand up woman ... speak up woman.. stood there staring into space ... mouth half open as usual ... waiting to be led away ... glad of that hand on her arm ... now this ... something she had to tell ... could that be?

(381)

This passage not only shows some similarities with the episode of the *Purgatory* for the rendition of the difficulty of the mouth to articulate a speech of confession but also, it brings attention to the kind of performance that a subject is called to enact when a judging court requires a specific discourse from him / her. In this light, Mouth's words seems to be commenting directly on the theatrical spectacle she is participating in, where the court is

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<sup>75</sup> Brater 191.

identified with the audience. Her speech is constructed in such a way that it always defers the central point of the narration: she evokes the presence of a female figure whose revelation of identity is constantly postponed by the exclamation of her habitual formula or by the relapse into the disquisition about the speaking act's complex mechanisms.

In line with quoted the passages taken from *Purgatorio*, *Not I's* rendition of the functioning of the parts engaged in the process of Mouth's articulation is rendered by the evocation of tactile or sonic images. In fact, Mouth expresses the movements of her obscured body in such a way that the sense of spatial and figurative emptiness and sterility given by the darkness which dominates the stage is filled with forceful images. For example, the efforts of the ears to perceive a sound which is eventually not delivered, are described by the perception of a noise coming from the skull, that indicates at one hand, the kind of ratiocinative, logical exercise she is making and on other hand her extreme relapse into interiority. Such rational yet eccentric process is also identified with the workings of the brain. The sound that is resonating in the interior space of the character, conveys a sense of dullness. The images of the roar and of the buzzing expresses like a short-circuit, an harsh failure in achieving the final goal of the process, that is sound, speech, the harmonization and the unification of the activity described. In line with this vision, in an interview recorded in 1973, Billie Whitelaw expressed her vision of *Not I* with forceful words. According to the actress, the play consisted in an "inner scream, in there, and no escape in it".<sup>76</sup>

Something bagging in the brain ... begging the mouth to stop for a moment if only for a moment ... and no response ... as if it hadn't heard ... or couldn't couldn't pause for a second like maddened all together straining to hear ... piece it together ... and the brain ... raving away on its own ... trying to make sense of it...

(380)

Mouth's scream forcefully manifests the ultimate incapability of the speaking subject to give an order to her interiority. Moreover, it functions as visceral, eloquent confirmation of the traumatic contents of the soliloquy which Mouth conjures up.

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<sup>76</sup> *Not I` starring and introduced by Billie Whitelaw*, produced for BBC by Tristram Powell, dir. Anthony Page, 1977, 1 min. 50 sec. [http://ubu.com/film/beckett\\_not.html](http://ubu.com/film/beckett_not.html)14 July 2015.

Couldn't make the sound ... not any sound ... no sound of any kind ...  
no screaming for help for example ... should she feel so inclined ...  
scream... [*Screams.*] ... then listen [*Silence.*]

(378)

After the screaming in fact, Mouth express the difficult and fragmentary perception of the body and of its parts.

... scream again ... [*Screams again.*] ... then listen again ... [*Silence.*]  
... no ... spared that ... all silent as the grave ... no part- ... what? ... the  
buzzing? ... yes ... all silent but for the buzzing ... so-called ... no part  
of her moving ... that she could feel ... just the eyelids ... presumably  
... on and off ...

(378)

The body is thus conceived as a chaotic and problematic structure: in light of the difficulty to grasp the totality of its movements, Mouth refers to it as a machine, as a composite functional system.

Her lips moving ... imagine her lips moving! ... the cheeks ... the jaws..  
the whole face ... all those- what? .. the tongue?.. yes the tongue... yes  
the tongue in the mouth .. all those contortions without which ... no  
speech possible ...

.....

That feeling was coming back... imagine! Feeling coming back!..  
starting at the top... the working down ... the whole machine ...

.....

Whole body like gone ... just the mouth ... lips ... cheeks...  
jaws...

(379- 380)

The fixation with the particular parts and with the understanding of the automatism according to which they function, deconstructs the unity of the body and the sense of unity of the subject to which it belongs, thus achieving an effect of dehumanization. Therefore, the dichotomy of movement vastly present in the Beckettian oeuvre, the intermittent movement of opening/closing, stands in this work not only for the actual movement which distinguishes Mouth's process of emission of sounds but also for the mechanistic effort of the narrator in conceptualizing the source and outcome of this act, which entails the isolation and the analysis of the specific phases of the oral articulation.

Evidently, fragmentariness emerges as a central issue in the discussion of *Not I*, a topic which has been debated by many critical voices.<sup>77</sup> Among them, Enoch Brater approaches fragmentariness from a psychological point of view and speaks in Jungian terms of a dislocation of personality caused by an identity crisis. According to this, the critic reads the Auditor's figures as a rendition of the Jungian shadow and sees Mouth as “an image not of wholeness, of a reconciliation of opposites, but of fragmentation and destruction.”<sup>78</sup> The isolation and fragmentariness expressed by the traumatic experiences which Mouth conveys during her frenzied soliloquy, are reflected by the visual and sonic aspects of the performance and therefore projected onto the spectator's experience of it. As the critic states in the conclusion of his essay,

*Not I* makes us desperately aware of the agonizing limitations of seeing, hearing, and speaking. Yet before Beckett such limitations

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77 Inasmuch as Mouth is a female character, particularly important are the debates raised from the perspective of gender. *Women in Beckett* (Illinois: Illini Books Edition, 1992), a work edited by Linda Ben-Zvi collects a number of essays which discuss *Not I* in terms of experiences of castration and marginality. “ ‘Her lips moving` : the castrated voice of *Not I*” by Ann Wilson; “Portrait of a woman: the experience of marginality in *Not I*” by Dina Sherzer; “ Female subjectivity in *Not I* and *Rockaby*” by Lois Oppenheim.

78 Brater 196.

never seemed so theatrically exciting. Beckett's "drama stripped for inaction" thus implies ironically, an extraordinary amount of activity radiating from the stage, simultaneously visual, verbal and aural ... Beckett sets into motion a drama in which each sensory stimulus has the kinetic potential to stimulate all the three sensory organs activated in this play.<sup>79</sup>

The theatrically productive opposition between fixity and movement suggested by Brater, mirrors the instability of consciousness of the individual concealed behind Mouth, whose speech oscillates between moments of analytic, mechanistic description to others where a sense of subjectivity is addressed. The difference between the way this is rendered with respect to the process of verbalization, consists in a shift from a sense of rigidity to one of fluidity.

Returning to that association between liquidity and liberation, confession and purgation by tears and water that we found in Dante's depiction of his confession, let's consider how Beckett's work evokes such dimension by uniting the concept of the stream to a double characterization of the presence of the eye in the narration. The following passage introduces an image which opens another visual and tactical field of perception: tears, which seem to bring a sort of calmness and reflection in the midst of the frenetic flow of events narrated in Mouth's discourse. The character sits a little mound and sees her tears on her hand. She recognizes they belong to her.

...dusk ... sitting staring staring at her hand .. there in the lap ... palm upward ... suddenly saw it wet ... the palm ... tears presumably ... hers presumably ... no one else for miles ... no sound ... just the tears ... sat and watch them cry ... all over in a second ... or grabbing at straw ... the brain ... flockering away on its own ... quick grab and on ... nothing there ... on the next ... bad as the voice ... worse ... as little sense ... all that together ... can't- ... what?... the buzzing?

(380-381)

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<sup>79</sup> "Drama stripped for inaction" is an expression which Brater draws from Edith Kern's essay "Drama Stripped for Inaction: Beckett's *Godot*" *Yale French Studies*, 14 (Winter, 1954-55) 41-47.

As we can see, the stream is interrupted by a question, evoking once again the buzzing. Later in the text, the association of a flowing, liquid but impetuous movement, as that of an explosion of a natural, irrational need of expression is combined with the presence of an eye.

Sometimes... sudden urge ... once or twice a year ... always winter  
some strange reason ... the long evenings ... hours of darkness ...  
sudden urge to ... tell ... then she rush out stop the first she saw ...  
nearest lavatory ... start pouring it out ... steady stream ... mad stuff ...  
half the vowels wrong ... no one could follow ... till she saw the stare  
she was getting ... then die of shame ... crawl back in...

(382)

While in the former passage the eye mentioned belongs to the speaking subject, in the latter the eye becomes the stare of an external viewer. Hinting again at the steady stare of the audience, Mouth, feeling observed and exposed in a moment of compulsive, irrational liberation, worries again about her circumstances and continues to deliver her “damnation-narration”.<sup>80</sup>

In conclusion, the image conveyed by the “steady stream”<sup>81</sup> emerges as the expression which epitomizes the ambivalent character of Mouth's verbal performance. In fact, the sense created by juxtaposition of the two terms, indicates a torrential verbal flux which anyway retains the characteristics of fixity and obduracy of the character's physical and psychological condition. Indeed, even though Mouth's “contortions” are unpredictable, delirious and frenetic, the speech of the character cyclically returns to negate her identity. If on the one hand this negation can be read as a strategy to evacuate the spectator's objectifying presence, on the other hand it suggests that the character will never be able to overcome her traumatic experiences.

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80 Elam “Dead Heads” 155.

81 The expression “steady stream” appears three times in Beckett's text, 379-380-382.

## 5. Unreliability of Perception in *Footfalls*

### 5.1 Contextualization and Genesis of the Work

In light of its minimalistic setting, *Footfalls*, which Beckett began to write in 1975 and was first performed one year after, bears a substantial continuity with the precedent works analysed but at the same its aesthetic identity significantly differs, together with the way in which it engages with the fourth wall of the theatrical space. The strong visual impact of both *Play* and *Not I*, is characterized by the fixity of the figures on stage and by the intrusive use of the light guiding the spectator's gaze. They both feature more than one figure, whose reciprocal positions reflect the relationship that the performance creates between stage and audience.

With *Footfalls* we are dealing with a work which apparently presents no ambition to question the presence of the public as it happens in the two precedent works, which retain a clear, exposed metatheatrical quality. The main reason why this play may be seen as more respectful of the conventional barriers between stage and audience and apparently not engaging with a metatheatrical language, is that the character of May, the ghostly protagonist of the play, can be identified with a storyteller, whose role and function is to relate stories and give voice to different characters. Since May is the only figure present on stage and impersonates the role of the storyteller as well as that of the main character of the stories, the performance results marked by introversion and ambiguity, effects which are heightened by the shadowy aesthetic which distinguishes this work. Even more, as Gontarski claims, with this work,

Beckett continued his ontological exploration of being in narrative and finally being as narrative, producing in the body of the text the text as body. The thought-tormented body we see pacing before us in *Footfalls* is not there, or rather she exists only within the embedded narratives of the play.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Stanley E. Gontarski, "The body in the body of Beckett's theater", *Samuel Beckett Today* Vol. 11 *Samuel Beckett: endlessness in the year 2000*. (2001): 174.

May ruminates about her existence pacing from side to side of the stage and conjuring up a narrative which is ambiguous and chaotic. Consumed by the effort to elaborate a meaning for her condition, the woman on stage leads a performance which seems to be disinterested of and impassive to the presence of the audience. It is so that the action on stage appears to be completely withdrawn into itself, indifferent of external responses, utterly separated and detached from the spectator's space and presence and thus, reflecting the kind of solitary, secluded, insecure life the protagonist narrates. In this sense, one of the challenges of *Footfalls* is the configuration of a spectral, supernatural effect which is created and represented in the present time of the performance.

The spectator is confronted with an image which has something surrealistic, which seems an emanation of the unconscious and yet is there acted in front of its eyes. Indeed, vagueness and impalpability stand as the principles governing both the visual and the narrative levels of the play. The combination of these forces achieves the effect that on stage a phantasmal body is moving but resonating with corporeal weight. The character paces and crosses the darkness of the bare stage following a strip of light that illuminates the floor. May, whose name indicates a "likelihood" of presence rather than a "state", is in fact an in-between figure, inasmuch as her identity is never stated but on the contrary, dispersed and continuously shifting in the course the narration.

Accordingly, the ambiguous quality of the narrative conceived, derives from an unsolvable doubt located in the senses of the character: May's is anchored on the ground and resonates with the weight of her body, while her identity fluctuates between memory and imagination. As a reflection, a radical doubt is placed on the spectator's perception of the performance, which results from the contrast and the ambiguity emerging between what is heard and what is seen. More precisely, the perception the audience has of the performance reflects the precarious quality of the character's identity, which is produced by the discrepancy between cryptic, multifaceted narrative which is told and the monotonous, redundant movement which is performed.

For the conception of the protagonist of *Footfalls*, the dramatist seems to have drawn important aspects from his recurrent source of inspiration, Dante's *Comedy*. In canto III of *Inferno*, we find the Vestibule, or alternatively called the Ante-Inferno,<sup>83</sup> the

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83 Being symmetrical with the structure of *Inferno*, which is shaped as a funnel, the mount of *Purgatory* has an Ante-Purgatory. It is divided in two terraces which "are occupied by those who, in one way or another, failed to avail themselves in good time of the means of Grace, and died so unprepared or imperfectly prepared, repenting only *in articulo mortis*. Of all the 'punishments' in Purgatory, theirs alone is wholly penal and imposed from without; and it consists solely in being obliged to wait for a fixed period of time

zone which precedes the banks of river Acheron, where Charon waits to take the damned souls to Minos, who proclaims their judgement and the Circle to which they are destined. The figures which dwell in the in-between space of the Ante-Inferno, the Futile, are not even worthy of a judgement but condemned to a painful position and are continuously tormented by swarms of wasps and hornets. Kept outside of the Infernal walls, these figures live in a condition which is even more suspended than that of the other sinners. In fact, while the latter have received their ultimate judgement, the Futile are kept in a position of suspension which is not life and neither death.

“... the dismal company  
Of wretched spirits thus find their guerdon due  
Whose lives knew neither praise nor infamy ....”

.....

“This dreary huddle has no hope of death,  
Yet its blind life trails on so low and crass  
That every other faith envieth.”

*Inferno, Canto III, 34-37, 46-49)*

To convey an image which reflects this type of existence, Dante depicts them as continuously chasing a moving banner.

So I beheld, and lo! An ensign borne  
whirling, that span and ran, as in disdain  
Of any rest; and there the folk forlorn

Rushed after it, in such an endless train,  
It never would have entered in my head  
There were so many men whom death had slain.

*(Inferno, Canto III, 52-57)*

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before being admitted to the ‘cleansing pains’ of Purgatory itself.” Sayers *Purgatory* 163.

From these passages and from the poet's description of the Futile as of "scum, who'd never lived" (*Inferno*, Canto III, 63), it emerges that the connections between these figures and the character of *Footfalls* are multiple and telling. In fact, not only in their movement we can recognize the compulsive, monomaniacal and helpless pacing to and fro of May, but also, we can track the same conception of an existence of inconsistency, the incapability of taking positions and choices in life. This is ultimately what traps May and the Futile in their movements which hint, for the former at her self-exclusion from the world, which locks her in a condition of suspension with respect to time and space, and for the latter, at their exclusion and from the divine judgement and from Dante's and Virgil's attention.<sup>84</sup>

Interestingly enough, Knowlson's opinion on the genesis of Beckett's work confirms the correspondence between May and the Futile. According to him in fact, "the woman in *Footfalls* was specifically linked by Beckett with the young female patient of Jung, of whom Beckett heard him speak in 1935."<sup>85</sup> If the Futile "never lived" (*Inferno*, Canto III, 63), Jung's "patient had "never really been born".<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, the critic comments on the physical and psychological situation of the character. Reporting his words, "if we think of May for a moment as a purely clinical case, her symptoms are of a total distancing of herself from the outside world, a radical agoraphobia and a chronic neurosis which finds its outlet in her obsessional pacing".<sup>87</sup>

## 5.2 Whose Voice is Speaking? May as the Voice of the Mother

Throughout the play, in correspondence with the four movements in which it is divided,<sup>88</sup> four micro-narratives are narrated which try to give sense or at least, a form to the woman's psychological abyss. The first and second episodes which are presented, introduce the figure of a girl living her adolescence in isolation and becoming a middle-aged woman without any change occurring in her condition. The script presents two characters for *Footfalls*: one is M, May, which we can see on stage, barely illuminated in her tattered gown, the other is V, which in the script stands for "woman's voice." This voice is a disembodied one and occurs only during the first and second parts the play,

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84 In opposition with all the other damned, the The Futile are not interrogated by Dante.

85 Knowlson 616.

86 Knowlson 616.

87 Knowlson 616.

88 A careful discussion of the structure of *Footfalls* is provided by Ruby Cohn in the essay "The Femme Fatale on Beckett's Stage" *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Illinois: Illini Books Edition, 1992) 168.

interpreting the role of a figure which May calls “mother”. At this point a first ambiguity arises. In fact, there are various factors supporting the interpretation that this woman's voice may actually represent that of May, inhabited by the shadow of the figure of the Mother. Although the dialogue conjured by the two voices presents a domestic scene, where we can imagine the daughter pacing and the mother lying motionless at the second floor, the “dark upstage” (399) staring at the woman, a different, anti-naturalistic hypothesis can be supported: the mother, whose infirm conditions are alluded to, may actually be dead, as the first ambiguous lines of the dramatic text may cryptically suggest.

M: Mother. [*Pause. No louder.*] Mother.

[*Pause.*]

V: Yes, May.

M: Were you asleep?

V: Deep asleep. [*Pause.*] I heard you in my deep sleep. [*Pause.*]

There is no sleep so deep I would not hear you there.

(399)

The “deep sleep” may in fact stand for a metaphor for death.<sup>89</sup> From a visual perspective, inasmuch as only one character is visible on stage, the fact that May may be giving voice to the mother or on the contrary, the hypothesis that the voice comes from a dimension different from that of the stage and thus may be apt to symbolize a mental projection of the disturbed woman, cannot be asserted with certainty inasmuch as there is not enough light to see the movements of May's lips. Admittedly, as the script reports, V's sounds comes from the “dark upstage”(399), which practically means that May cannot be speaking the mother's lines directly: even though the voices are different and performed by two different actresses, the ghostly setting of the play conveys the illusion that the voice of the mother is a mental projection of May, which as a surrealistic effect, is hearable also by the audience. The fact that the provenience of this voice is from an higher and obscured position opens

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<sup>89</sup> The motif of “the return of the dead” is thematized in other dramatic works by Beckett, as for example *Embers* and *Eh Joe*. Moreover, in other plays, sleep is charged of an ambiguity: it stands for a suspended dimension, half-way between life and death. This can be observed for example in *Endgame* (the grotesque, deadly characters of Nagg and Nell are kept inside bins whose lids are opened only when the characters “awake” to act their part) and in *Happy Days* (Winnie's uncanny routine revolves around moments of wake and others of sleep).

the possibilities of interpretation about the kind of source it may have. Such disembodied voice reinforces the spectral feeling of the performance and it achieves the effect of a supernatural presence haunting the stage: the audience can hear the voice speaking in May's head.

At first the play presents a dialogue where the voices of M and V speak alternating their lines. "M: Would you like me to change your position again? V. Yes, but it is too soon." (400).<sup>90</sup> The question, apparently referring to the cures a daughter gives to an old mother, can also be interpreted as expressing an exchange of role. The answer given by V, may be anticipating the interpretation of the mother's role that May performs in the last part of the play. Moreover, as various critics have observed, if M stands for the initial letter of May it should be noticed that it also curiously coincides with the initial letter of the word "mother".<sup>91</sup> Recalling Dante's description of the emptiness of the existence of the Futile, "that every other faith envieth" (*Inferno*, Canto III, 49), May may be mimicking the figure of her mother and improvising or reenacting a dialogue they might have had, to make herself feel useful to something, "Would you like me to inject you again? ... Straighten your pillows?[Pause.] Change your drawsheets? ..." (400).

The monologue carried out by V begins with words introducing an ambiguity about the kind of presence the voice represents, as if it was a force taking the body of the woman and speaking through and for it, as in a disturbed psychological process. "I walk here now. [Pause.] Rather I come and stand. [Pause.] At nightfall. [Pause.] She fancies she is alone. [Pause.] See how still she stands, how stark with her face to the wall. [Pause.] How outwardly unmoved" (401).<sup>92</sup> During the delivery of these words May alternates moments when she halts and stands as if paralysed facing front to the audience, with others when her pacing runs parallel to the words uttered by V, which seem to order and accompany her movement. "Watch how feat she wheels ... Seven, eight, nine, wheel." (401). Such intermittent shifts between fixity and motion reflect the instability of identity of the character.

In *Footfalls*, corporeality is conceived in terms of mutability and transition. In line

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90 Trish McTighe reads this line in light the a mother/daughter relationship lived as "the perpetuation of a cycle of reproduction where female acts as container for another [and] marked by an anxiety over reproduction, the becoming of a place or a container for another." *The Haptic Aesthetic in Samuel Beckett's drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 102.

91 The anagrammatic nature of May's character has been observed by both Cohn "The Femme Fatale on Beckett's Stage", 168 and Gontarski, 6.

92 As pointed out earlier, imagining a domestic context for this scene, the other possible interpretation of these lines is that the mother is invalid and cannot walk, and lies motionless staring to the daughter.

with this, the figure which we grasp on stage is an evanescent one, its contours gradually dissolving. Beckett directs the light in such a way that the face of the woman is the least visible thing we can perceive. Moreover, after a moment of complete silence and darkness, the intensity of the light is diminished each time the sound of a chime resonates and orders the four parts of the performance. Thanks to such minimalistic and expressive use of light, the perception of the sonic aspects of the performance is rendered doubtful, as it has been suggested by the precedent discussion about the ambiguity of the sources of the voices in the play.

Moreover, it is also the “low and slow”(399) quality that Beckett envisages for both the voices, that forcefully participates in the creation of a radical uncertainty in the perception of the sources of the sounds which are heard.<sup>93</sup> As we can hear from a clip of *Footfalls*, directed by Beckett himself and starring Billie Whitelaw as May and Christine Collins as Voice, such use of the voices, renders them impersonal.<sup>94</sup> It is mainly due to the decrepit character of the mother's one if we can distinguish the individual voices of the two. The difference between the quality of the timbers is in fact overshadowed by the unnatural and dispassionate way in which the actors speak. The result is that M's and V's voices are both perceived as an equivalent, uncoloured emanation coming from a loss of human and physical particularity. As we will see, the degree of obscurity produced by the use of voice heightens more and more in the flux of the performance and amplifies the doubtfulness and confusion which are created at narrative level and consequently projected onto the spectator's experience of the performance. In Metha's view,

to successfully subvert and alert an alert and normally sanguine theater audience Beckett's ghosts must first create states of susceptibility ... the ghost's first great weapon is its inky domain, a blackness that, if held long enough, will destroy time, place and

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93 Evidently the same cannot be said about the sound of May's pacing.

94 *Samuel Beckett : Eh Joe ; Footfalls ; Rockaby*, prod. Princeton, N.J. : Films for the Humanities & Sciences, (1988). The video is described as it follows: “filmed a year before the author's death in 1989, these special studio recordings of *Eh Joe*, *Footfalls*, and *Rockaby* are brief, concentrated, and pared down to the absolute essentials, even to the exclusion of color are the definitive productions, made in collaboration with the Nobel Laureate himself and featuring his favourite and most-trusted actress, Billie Whitelaw. Together these plays explore the themes of consciousness and self-image in Beckett's inimitable style.” <<http://www.worldcat.org/title/samuel-beckett-eh-joe-footfalls-rockaby/oclc/754808719?referer=di&ht=edition>> 14 July 2015. Fragments of the clip can be found at this link <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-zhUBPDitk&list=PL40AF889C7EE0204C&index=6>>14 July 2015.

community and force each spectator into himself.<sup>95</sup>

The words quoted above are apt to explain the effect produced by the third narrative which is told, this time by M alone. The “Sequel” session<sup>96</sup> of *Footfalls* presents what could be the perfect scenario of a Gothic tale, introducing element of suspense and estrangement to the listener.<sup>97</sup> The function of the mysterious characterization of this session has a double meaning: the obscure, equivocal character of the performance is pushed further and the phantasmal state of May's identity is confirmed within the narrative. It is so that the inconsistent, movable, volatile, and melancholic nature of both the character and of the performance are established. As it happens in other moments during the performance,<sup>98</sup> what is narrated coincides with the movement which is visible on stage. The following lines describe the vision of a ghostly figure hunting a church at nightfall.

Some nights she would halt, as frozen by some shudder of the mind,  
and stand stark still till she could move again. But many were also the  
nights when she paced without pause, up and down, before vanishing  
the way she come. [Pause.] No sound. [Pause.] None at least to be  
heard. [Pause.] The semblance.

(402)

“Semblance”, seems to be word epitomizing the in-betweenness that marks the character's story and performance. Qualifying the appearance of a form or of an image, the terms has double meaning: it may indicate a “phantasmal form” or express a similarity, a resemblance to something.<sup>99</sup> Both meanings convey the sense of something devoid of substantiality, which describes the shadowy quality of May's image and alludes to the

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95 Xerxes Metha “Ghosts” *Directing Beckett*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) 171-172.

96 Cohn “The Femme Fatale on Beckett's Stage” 168.

97 “ In *Footfalls* Beckett has written a modern mystery tale ...” Cohn “The Femme Fatale on Beckett's Stage” 168.

98 During V's monologue, there are moments when the voice describes the actual movement of May, as reported by the passage quoted from *Beckett*, 401 at page 64 of this thesis.

99 “Semblance.” Def. 1-2. <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/semblance?showCookiePolicy=true>

connection between the micro-narratives which are told. These, are in fact all similar as they play with different recombinations of the mother/ daughter relationship, with the motif of the ghost tale, and with the anagrams of the characters' name. As a result, we cannot establish an original, authentic story or episode form which they originate. Such effect of disorientation played at narrative level is counterbalanced by the steps of the character, which seems to be the only thing of the performance which we can call "real" inasmuch as their sound is produced in simultaneity with the movement of the character and its starkness and austerity stand in opposition with the vagueness of all the other aspects of the performance.

The suggestive lyrical images evoked to describe May's movements are expression of a physical instability which leads to dematerialization, " -watch her pass before the candelabrum, how its flames, their light ... like moon though passing rack" (402). Combined with the act of pacing, such expressions of instability conveys the emptiness and the volatility which concerns the existential level of the character. There is in fact a discord between the various possibilities of embodiment that May's voice accomplishes, and between the fixed scheme and sound of her motion, which binds her body in the precise space she paces. The repetitive noise of her steps, functions as the reminder of the existential paradox which she lives: her identity is dispersed between the materialistic, monodimensional world of physicality and the virtual, plural dimensions which she conjures up through her narration, where her identity shifts between different names, stories and characters. Such element of contraposition between speech and movement, enlarging the range of possible significations of the performance, is widely spread throughout Beckett's oeuvre. In McMullan's view,

the tension between the meaning and pattern of performance emerges as a major preoccupation of the later plays. The stages of composition of the plays ... reveal a process whereby meaning becomes increasingly suggestive and open, while the text is shaped into ever more precise and sonorous patterns.<sup>100</sup>

Therefore, ambiguity and confusion are created by the multifaceted alternatives and

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<sup>100</sup> Anna McMullan "Beckett as director" *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, Ed. John Pilling. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 198.

coincidences which link and simultaneously differentiate the narratives which are told, and by the ghostly quality of the physical and lyrical figures which are presented, dissolving into the precariousness of mysterious and supernatural forms. These, combined with the repetitive, punctual sound of the pacing, point to a vision of the body which oscillates between its various possibilities of embodiment through performance and performativity, and between the material, organic form of presence it retains, the anchor to reality.

### 5.3 Doubt and Discrepancies of Perception

If the first two parts of the text play with the ambiguity of May's possible double identity by the dramatization of a mother-daughter's relationship set in a domestic context, and if the third one establishes the ephemeral quality of the atmospheres and of the figures by evoking stories that belong to the domain of the mysterious and of the supernatural, the last part gives way to a multiplication of these levels of suspense and confusion. The narrative in part four, delivered by May, presents a mother and a daughter sitting at a table for dinner. It presents therefore a domestic every day scene, which is gradually charged with a cryptic, haunted tone. Within this composite narrative an ambiguous game of *mise en abyme* is played. In fact, it combines elements of the precedent narrations as well as adding new ones which confuse the understanding of the roles and of the allusions to the precedent. The narrator plays with the characters' names, changing them allusively into Mrs W (where the letter W stands as the reverse of M, May and Mother) and Amy (anagram of May).<sup>101</sup>

In the recorded version directed by Beckett, you can listen to Billie Whitelaw modifying her initial apathetic tone to perform the dialogue exchanged by the characters displayed in the narratives.<sup>102</sup> In such a way, a metafictional effect is created both textually and theatrically. Through the expressive use of voice which embodies different roles in an intermittent fashion and by the actress' uttering of the name of the character that she is going to interpret, as in clumsy reading of a script, the performance clearly conveys that the stories enacted belong to a subject which is constantly, wickedly engaged in a scheme of performativity. This entails that the presence and materiality of May's body is continuously engaged in a process of repetition and mimicry of ritualistic or

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101 Cohn "The Femme Fatale on Beckett's Stage" 168.

102 4 min. 40 sec. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zEnsaIjWyA>> 14 July 2015.

commemorative<sup>103</sup> patterns of behaviour. It is precisely by this practice that May escapes the determination of a specific identity, by continuously playing a role which reinvents and disperses itself through a multiplicity of characterizations.

While the characters in *Play* and *Footfalls* reacted to and defended themselves from the voyeuristic presence violating them with vexed or frenzied expressions, May candidly but peremptorily rejects it by simply negating it. In the quoted lines which follow, Mrs W asks for a confirmation of the physical presence of the daughter by posing her a question about something she might have observed in a past moment. Rejecting the fixation of her figure coming from an external gaze, not only Amy denies to have seen or heard something particular but also, she affirms that she was absent. Here, a contradiction emerges between the perceptions that Mrs W reports, and Amy's negation of her physical presence.

raising her head and fixing Amy full in the eye she said – [Pause.]- she murmured, fixing Amy full in the eye she murmured, Amy did you observe anything ... strange at Evensong? ... Amy: ... I observed nothing of any kind, strange or otherwise. I saw nothing, heard nothing, of any kind. I was not there. Mrs W: Not there? Amy: Not there. Mrs W: But I heard you respond.[*Pause.*]-How could possibly have said Amen if, as you claim, you were not there? [*Pause.*]The love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all, now and for evermore. Amen[*Pause.*]-I heard you distinctly.

(403)

The dissonance produced by the juxtaposition of the image of “Holy ghost”, a presence which cannot be fixed and which is defined by absence, and on the other hand, the word stating a belief in a lasting state of things, “Amen”, reflects the contradictory state of perception of the two characters. This all brings the attention to the in-between, inconsistent presences that are put on stage. The opposition between what is seen and what is heard, between what is not present as visible but which can anyway be heard and

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103 If we interpret the presence of the mother as phantasmatic, i.e. the mother's voice stands for her dead character, May's performance has a commemorative aspect, which consists in the evocation of the maternal figure and in the recollection of homely scenes between mother and daughter.

the discrepancy between the perceptions reported by the narrator, convey a sense of disorientation which envelops both the character on stage and the experience the audience has of the performance, in which the play is similar to *Play* and *Not I*.

In conclusion, by the allusions and the problematic statement about perception in the narrative, the senses of the spectator are implicated even if they are not directly mentioned. In opposition with the other two plays analysed, it seems in fact that *Footfalls* shows a disregard for the external presence of the audience. In fact, even though May performs the role of the narrator, the stories she tells are directed to herself and hardly makes sense for others. While *Play* and *Not I* shares a narrative strategy of interruption and fragmentation, where the disjointed parts of the discourses uttered by the characters always revolve around a central issue (*Play*) or around something that has to be negated (*Not I*), *Footfalls* is similar to *Not I* in terms of narrative incongruity and of visual indistinctness of the stage-image.

Indeed, these two plays thematize the characters' unwillingness and incapability to acknowledge identity: the way in which the distance and the separation from the external world are represented, mark their different approaches to the critique of theatre, and more specifically, to the discussion of the presence of the spectator in the theatrical context. *Not I's Mouth*, which appears as an illuminated hole in the complete darkness of the stage, invites and provoke the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator also in light of the sexual analogies that it inspires. Speaking about the image of Mouth, in his essay "Dead Heads" Keir Elam, writes that "detached from its bodily context and so from its codified meaning (as 'mouth'), [it] becomes a corporeal and semantic (black) hole onto or into which the spectator may project any number of literally organic senses; it takes on it turn roles of vagina, uterus, anus, mouth proper, eye and ear."<sup>104</sup> Moreover, the fixity of Mouth's position on stage reflects the traumatic block of the character as well as the behaviour of the spectator, which despite the indistinctness which reigns, directs its gaze to such obsessive image.

*Footfalls* gives an image of movement to the character's obsession which consists in the vision of a whole yet phantasmal body, that in contrast with *Not I's* mouth is completely devoid of a sense of carnality, sensuality and perversion. Furthermore, differently from *Play* and *Not I*, whose endings don't see a modification of the condition and of the postures of characters, *Footfalls* does accomplish a change. After the fourth ritual chiming, the sound and the light turn even weaker and May is not visible anymore.

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104 Elam "Dead Heads" 151.

Such disappearance does not result as an abrupt event but rather as movement of waning which the performance follows from the very beginning. As Cohn notes, with this work Beckett gradually passes from a display of mutability and vagueness, to one of absence and dissolution.

From scene to scene, we perceive fewer steps, dimmer light, fainter chimes; the first three movements of *Footfalls* describe a theatre asymptote, a metaphor for entropy. The fourth and last movement comes very close to zero, since we see the board and a vertical line of light ... unbroken by human trace.<sup>105</sup>

Coherently with the content of the last scene narrated and playing with the ghostly quality of her figure, May's disappearance decidedly confirms the rejection of an external gaze that threatens to fix her position. In the Sequel, the verb "to fix" is in fact repeatedly used to describe Mr. Winter's disposition towards Amy, which hints at the authority and persecution that the figure of the mother exercises on the daughter.<sup>106</sup>

Recalling the indifference that Virgil invited Dante to show for the fate of the Futile, " ... No reputation in the world it has/ Mercy and doom hold it alike in scorn /Let us not speak of these, but look and, pass" (*Inferno*, Canto III, 49-51), the theatrical presentation of a figure like that of May, produces the sense that the spectator's opinion and presence is helpless, and most importantly, inconsistent for a character constantly "revolving it all"(400-403), that means continuously and actively engaged in the dispersal and in reinvention of her identity. As observed in the precedent chapters, reflecting the "keen desire" (*Inferno*, Canto X, 6)<sup>107</sup> with which Dante approaches the sinners of Incontinence and the pitiless questioning he forces on Bocca degli Abati, the capability of expression of the characters of *Play* and of *Not I* are reduced and they are put in a condition where motion is negated. For this reason they are forced to struggle against the gaze which opposes them. On the other hand, the continuous movement that May performs and the effect of waning that is put in motion from the beginning of the performance, has more the effect of confounding the external eye.

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105 Cohn "The Femme Fatale on Beckett's Stage" 168.

106 See McTighe's discussion of *Footfalls'* mother-daughter relationship, 102.

107 See page 36 of the First Chapter for a longer quote of the Dante's passage.

The obscure consequences derived by May's utter isolation, may hint to the fact that her relapse into an interior world (all the scenes narrated evokes a domestic or indoor location) brought May to a difficult relationship with her body, more specifically to a difficulty in relating with its materiality, that is, in recognizing the functioning of its perceptive skills. The fixation with her own corporeality, is a consequence of the predicament described by the critic Postlewait as “the fragmented awareness of being in time, but not in harmony with it “,<sup>108</sup> a dilemma which haunts many of the Beckettian characters. Reporting a meaningful passage from the critic

The conflict, as almost always in Beckett's works, is between the disintegrating body and the questioning mind, both caught inexplicably in time while slowly moving toward death. The mind and its words attempt to take the measure of the body's existence, trying to tell how it is and was and will be, now and for evermore.<sup>109</sup>

The space of the stage, becomes for the character a space of isolation, where May, trapped in a wicked mechanism of defence against external obtrusions, paces in the company of ghosts through her relapse into her interior world of fiction, which is made up by memories and fantasies whose respective boundaries cannot be recognized. This play ultimately stages the volatility and the unreliability of theatrical performances: *Footfalls* achieves a metatheatrical language where doubt emerges as the dominant feeling and the dominant sense, which is personified by the figure of May, a *semblance*.

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108 Thomas Postlewait “Self-Performing Voices: Mind, Memory, and Time in Beckett's Drama” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1978): 473.

109 Postlewait 473.

## 6. Conclusion

The confrontation of the three plays discussed by this study, shows the movement towards abstraction that Beckett's dramatic language gradually achieves in the course of his career: in *Play* the image of the body is still recognisably "human" but altered by the the constrictions it endures; *Not I* adopts a strategy of concealment where the image of the isolated Mouth and the obscured figure of Auditor become icons whose mode of significations is direct and yet open to a series of different allusions and meanings; the phantasmal body staged in *Footfalls*, locked in its revolving movement, epitomizes a condition of doubt and suspension. Despite the patina of gloominess which envelops these minimalistic works, the ambiguities which their dramatic languages create, stimulate the reader's and the spectator's individual, exclusive reception and interpretation of them: through a strategy of abstraction and impoverishment combined with a iconoclastic treatment of corporeality, Beckett forces its audience to engage with his works with an approach which is more intuitive and than cerebral.

As it was showed in the course of the survey, despite the temporal, cultural and ideological distance which separates Dante and Beckett, their works are fundamentally united by the achievement of a "language of the body" which is formed according to the space in which the characters find themselves in, but which also involves the consideration of reader's and the spectator's positions. Accordingly, the *Inferno* and the Beckettian plays, convey transfixing descriptions of the physical conditions of their characters and thematize the failure of expression and the agony of perception. Despite the bleakness and the gravity which distinguishes such motives, the works produce an instability which makes the reader's experience of the text and the spectator's participation to the performance, lively and stimulating.

The circularity present in the structure and in the metaphysics of the *Comedy* and distinguishing the action of Beckett' s figures and the structure of his plays, corresponds to the instability and the vitality which the works engender, rooted on the conception of the body as an entity which moves "in and toward the world".<sup>110</sup> In this sense, characters, readers, spectators and authors included, are implicated in the existential discussions that the works conceive: If Dante literally inscribes "himself" in his poem, Beckett's metatheatricity implies the critique of his role as author. With regard to this, the passage

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110 Merleau-Ponty 131. The emphasis is mine.

which follow reports Martin Esslin's insightful take on the “obligation to express” that Beckett formulated in his *Dialogue with George Duthuit*<sup>111</sup>. The critic's words convey the sense that while writing, the author's shares the same predicament of the dramatic figures of his texts, which are obsessively concerned with the understanding of their being present in time and in space and thus, narrating precarious, unresolved stories.

... the only certain evidence of being is the individual's experience of his own consciousness, which in turn constantly in flux and ever changing and therefore negative rather than positive, the empty space though which the fleeting images pass. The existential experience is thus felt as as a succession of attempts to give shape to the void; when nothing can lay claim to final, definitive reality, we enter a world of games, of arbitrary actions structured to give the illusion of reality ... and if the artist feels the obligation to express his experience of being, he is, necessarily, engaged in a twofold enterprise, however heavy the odds against success may appear: he is engaged in trying to *communicate* his existential experience; and he is engaged in a *cognitive process*, an exploration of the possible modes of existential experience.<sup>112</sup>

The duality and ambiguity which feature Beckett as an author extend beyond his writing. In fact, in response to his reluctance to explain and clarify the enigmas of his works, his achievements have inspired and continue to inspire loads of critical writing from many different approaches (literary, dramatic, philosophical, psychoanalytical, visual, media studies...). Many critical voices continue to revolve around the questions raised by Beckett's works: precisely because *sense* is never fully achieved, they invite creative analysis and interpretations. Significantly enough, speaking about *Not I*, Beckett declares: “I am not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I hope the piece may work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect.”<sup>113</sup>

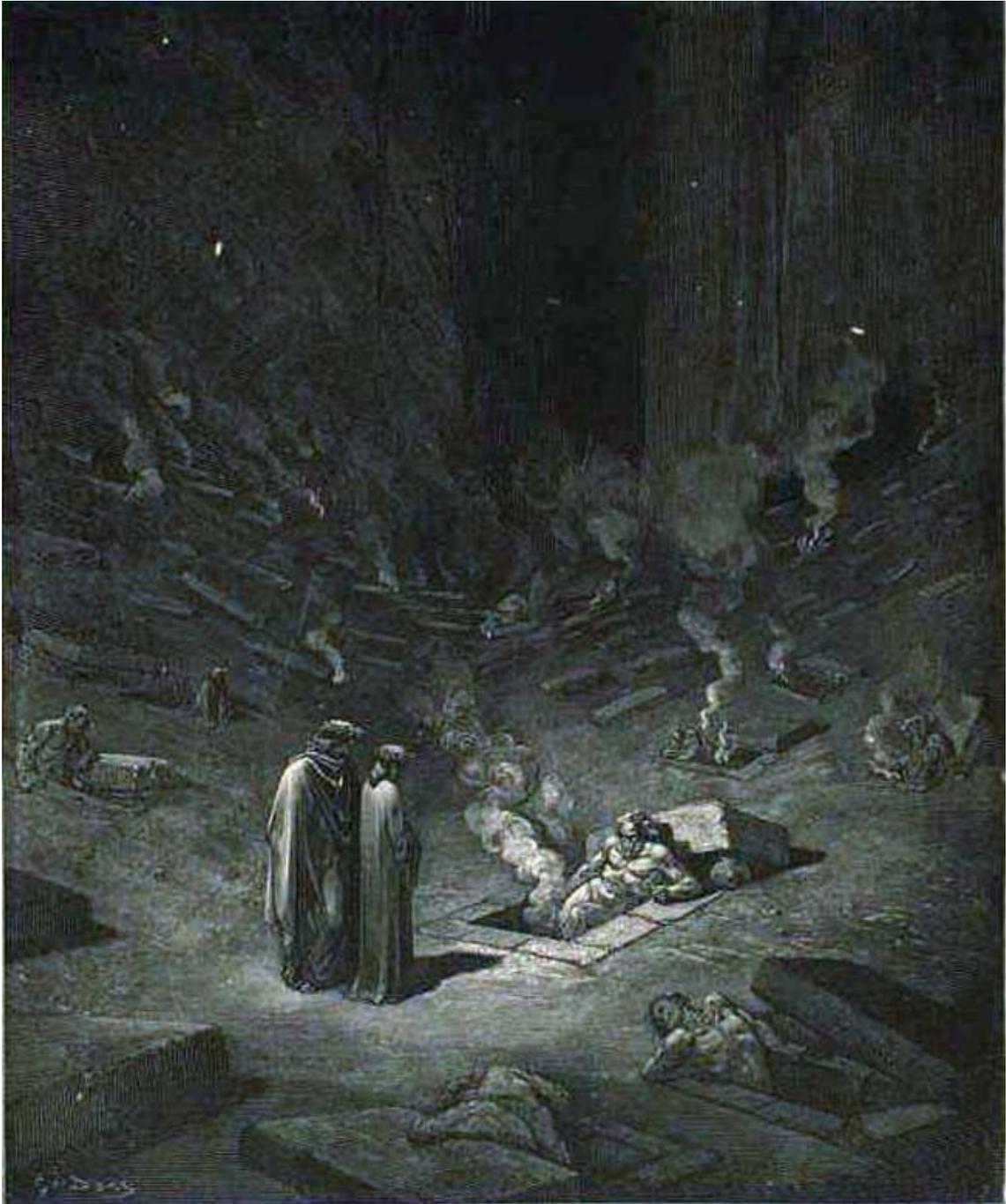
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111 Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, “Three Dialogues” *Samuel Beckett: a collection of critical essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1987).

112 Esslin “*Introduction*” 9.

113 Quoted from Brater, “The ‘I’ in Beckett's *Not I*.” 200.

## Pictures



*Pic. 1: Gustave, Doré, Dante and Virgil among the Heretics. Engraving. 1857-1867.*



*Pic. 2: Gustave Doré, Dante addressing Bocca degli Abati. Engraving. 1857-1867.*



*Pic. 3: Gustave Doré, Matelda immerses Dante in the Lethe. Engraving. 1868.*

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