

## Beckett's Purgatory through Dante, Joyce and the Absurd

### ABSTRACT

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This article aims to develop a brief explanation on Beckett's theatre, how this famous Irish author had read Dante's Divina Commedia and how deeply this literature had influenced in some aspects (especially aesthetical and narrative) the compositions written by Beckett, as well as to identify some correlations between the literary trajectory of Beckett and the purgatorial experience developed by Dante. In both authors there is a way through which their characters face the universal forces and the possibility to overcome their sins, purify their souls and achieve another state of narrative/personal living. It is not possible to track this path without facing Joyce as a middle term between the Florentine author and the Dubliner one, not as a kind of ascending level, but as a bridge that connects them particularly through the Joyce-Beckett partnership in Ulysses and how Beckett was introduced to the Commedia, probably in 1923-24.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante Alighieri. Samuel Beckett. Theodor Adorno. Theater of the Absurd.

The crucial part of *Divina Commedia* that is linked with Beckett's narrative is the Purgatorio, a place where the fragility of the human being is clearly present as a constant sorrow, as a continuous condition that makes a strong contrast between human sins/weakness and purity/divinity exposing the fact that humanity is fighting (as an individual or not) its problems and trying to purge its debts. In Dante's Purgatorio (Canto IV, vv. 106-135) we find Belacqua, a lutist from Florence who had met Dante and Virgilio among the mountains in the antipurgatorio while he was waiting to join the atmosphere of salvation and to start his purification process. Featured by his laziness and the impossibility to change his condition ("sedendo et quiescendo anima efficitur sapiens"), this character was reborn in the 20th Century as a partial homonymous Belacqua Shuah in the early works composed by Beckett like *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1931-32) and *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) as a man similar to Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* ("History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake") living an experience of inadequacy among the Dubliners and possibly related with his omonimo dantesco as an opposition to the contemporary productivism, a revival of the *otium letterario*, a "lazy" man under the post-industrial revolution concepts but a man that feels himself disabled to break the chains of his time and keep himself as an archaic literary shelter.

As Gabriele Frasca (Op. Cit., p. 12-13) said on Belacqua "la sua inefficienza, la sua inettitudine sta tutta qui: anima dell'antipurgatorio, egli si mostra come scaraventato in un ambiente purgatoriale, ove ognuno appare alla ricerca di sofisticate pratiche purificanti" ("His inefficiency, his ineptitude is all here: soul of the Ante-Purgatory he shows himself as thrown into a purgatorial environment where everyone looks for sophisticated purifying practices"), a condition that makes reference to Dante's character and links both Belacquas as an extraordinary and dissonant voice facing their confrontations and their distance from the social landscapes where they were launched. A voice in an ascending path searching for its own salvation. This way, Beckettian Belacqua, a kind of Dubliner flâneur who searches for love, faces suicidal conditions and failed marriages, camminante like Dedalus (Joyce), *The Man of the Crowd* (Poe) or even the anonymous Parisian characters (Baudelaire), full of indolence and "quiete come segno d'assenza di certezze ma di un'emissione di vuoto nella realtà" ("Quiet as a sign of absence of certainties but of a void emission into reality") (FRASCA, 1988, p. 15), lives the virtue of the contemplation (disguised as laziness as a consequence of its obvious inadequacy) and the search for the true *otium* (thwarted by - in a certain way also propelled by - a continuous human condition doomed to be perpetually cruel with no meaning) in a no-direction path.

In this sense, Belacqua can be related to the Theatre of the Absurd following the description made by Esslin – even though Beckett was not part of any movement or literary school – where the dramatic landscape is "melancholic, colored by a feeling of futility born from the disillusionment of old age and chronic hopelessness" (ESSLIN, 1960, p. 4) making possible an estrangement of the spectators in front of a piece that they cannot understand clearly, in front of an aesthetical and dramatic peak that cannot be totally absorbed by the viewers historically adapted to have a simple and naturalistic sight/comprehension over the reality. This absurdist theatre aims to create a situation in which the spectators assimilate the scene as a puzzle or a non-real overview (as Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*), a kind of outside sight well known in contemporary visual art like videoart, experimental painting and avant-garde photography, expanded

cinema or even performance, especially in the crossroads where all of them find each other. This kind of theatre – or visual and sensorial experience as a whole – promotes estrangement, political thought and self-questioning due to disconnection from the emotional fields in the piece already fed by a stronger meaning after Second World War and the genocide promoted by dictatorships in the second half of the 20th Century. As Esslin has defined:

The decline of religious faith, the destruction of the belief in automatic social and biological progress, the discovery of vast areas of irrational and unconscious forces within the human psyche, the loss of a sense of control over rational human development in an age of totalitarianism and weapons of mass destruction, have all contributed to the erosion of the basis for a dramatic convention in which the action proceeds within a fixed and self-evident framework of generally accepted values (ESSLIN, 1960, p. 6).

The terror and the estrangement contained in Beckett's theatre is also reported by Theodor W. Adorno in *Trying to Understand Endgame*, a text in which its author developed a philosophical comprehension on this piece relating it with Benjamin, Heidegger and Jasper's thoughts under the post-war theoretical lights without forgetting the experience of horror, death, chaos and the scorn suffered by human beings in the 20th century. He traces a connection, for example, between the fact that Hamm's parents in *Fin de partie* are detained, substantially nourished and hidden (maybe forgotten) inside cans and the moral overturning reached by the national-socialists, "the natural cohesion of life has become organic refuse [...] Beckett's thrashcans are the emblem of a culture restored after Auschwitz". (ADORNO, 1982, p. 143).

This way, the theatre of Beckett can be associated to Benjamin's theory of history and its mode to rescue those who were forgotten by the canon in the celebration of the Official and the consecration of the "winners" "contributing more to the humanization of the humanity" (BENJAMIN, 1975, p. 58 apud LOWY, 2010, p. 25) throughout a transcendence of the temporality achieved by the emergence of a continuum (ADORNO, Op. Cit., p. 120), the rise of a non-traditional drama where the catharsis does not arrive and the dilated time experience remains, always fed by the universal values on human condition. Benjamin makes us remember that everything expresses barbarism, even the civilization and the historical process that established it (BENJAMIN, 2012), thereby listening to those silenced voices is to wake up the dead, "[...] não é a voz a que damos ouvidos um eco de outras já silenciadas?" ("[...] is it not the voice to which we listen to an echo of others already silenced?") (Idem) in a trial against time, history and the win of the constant winners. In Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* the following phrases – "Also, Pikolo, was gibt es Neues? ("Then, Pikolo, what do we have new?") [...] Qu'est-ce qu'il y a comme soupe aujourd'hui?" ("What soup have we today?") – express the poverty and the hunger inside the concentration camps as a "real" report extracted from a historical event in the same way Beckett's characters fictionally face the limitrophe human condition, for example in *Fin de partie* when Clov and Hamm discuss: "Give him his pap. / There's no more pap. / [...] You'll never get any more pap". Gurisatti highlights Benjamin's historiographic method as a cycled and catastrophic view on humanity.

[...] per Benjamin, è che la costruzione storica che ne consegue avvenga per costellazioni nel segno di una temporalità specificamente

teológico-ebraica, cioè mistica e kabbalistica, intesa in termini nichilistico-messianici come catastrofe, emergenza, rottura della continuità, attimo, *kairós* e chance di salvezza. Niente di biologistico e naturalistico inficia questa temporalità che, anzi, vede nella storia-natura (il continuum, la ciclicità, la ripetizione, la caducità) il proprio demone e nemico in quanto destino, spazializzazione - cioè tradimento - del tempo (GURISATTI, 2010, p. 201).

Translation: [...] for Benjamin, it is that the historical construction that follows takes place by constellations in the sign of a specifically theological-Jewish temporality, that is, mystical and Kabbalistic, understood in nihilistic-messianic terms as catastrophe, emergency, rupture of continuity, moment, *kairós* and *chance* of salvation. Nothing biologistic and naturalistic invalidates this temporality which, indeed, sees in nature history (the *continuum*, the cyclicity, repetition, transience) its own demon and enemy as destiny, spatialization – that is betrayal – of time.

The scenario is continuously the same, a kind of purgatorial environment where its inhabitants are subdued to live in a non-exit blank and where time is perceived slowly (by the “estranged” viewers and by its own characters), the action is subordinate to non-conventional dramatic perspective and the oddness acts as a metalinguistic bridge connecting the diegetic slowness with the aesthetical way it has been built, the same estraneità from Belacqua, “un’estraneità che è l’estrema stimmata dell’indolenza” (“An estrangement that is the extreme indolence stigma”) (FRASCA, Op. Cit., p. 16). It is a common profile diluted into all Beckett’s characters – “ogni personaggio di Beckett potrebbe a ragione chiamarsi Belacqua” (“Every Beckett’s characters could be called Belacqua”) (Idem). The purgatorial condition under which Beckett’s characters continuously live differs basically from the Dante’s conception by the fact that those in the first case live under a lack of possibilities while they wait for an end, conditioned by historical and social cycles (as defined by Vico). There is a development of chronological cycles that make possible the repetition of actions in a way that humanity cannot break with. While living in a Purgatorial atmosphere the characters are placed in a non redemption way far away their atonement and the lights of Paradise, and they keep themselves condemned to live in this real and material facing everything inherent to the humankind. This attribution is made by Beckett when he opposed the pieces of Joyce to Dante’s Purgatorio concerning the possibility to reach an escape in both narratives.

“[...] O de Dante é cônico, e consequentemente implica um clímax (culmination). O do Sr. Joyce é esférico e nele não há clímax. No primeiro há a ascensão da inércia real (real vegetation) – o antepurgatório, em direção à inércia ideal (ideal vegetation) – o paraíso terrestre: no segundo não há ascensão, nem inércia ideal. No primeiro, absoluta progressão e consumação garantida: no segundo, fluxo – progressão ou retrogressão, e uma aparente consumação. No primeiro, o movimento é unidirecional, e um passo a frente representa um avanço definitivo: no segundo, o movimento não tem direção – ou é multidirecional, e um passo a frente é, por definição, um passo atrás. [...]” (BECKETT, 2018, p. 205-6).

Translation: Dante’s is conical and consequently implies culmination. Mr. Joyce’s is spherical and excludes culmination. In the one there is an ascent from real vegetation – Ante-Purgatory, to ideal vegetation –

Terrestrial Paradise: in the other there is no ascent and no ideal vegetation. In the one, absolute progression and a guaranteed consummation: in the other, flux – progression or retrogression, and an apparent consummation. In the one movement is unidirectional, and a step forward represents a net advance: in the other movement is non-directional – or multi-directional, and a step forward is, by definition, a step back.

Dante's heritage inside the lines written by Beckett can be found in Murphy ("watching the dayspring run through its zodiac, before the toil uphill to Paradise"), Molloy, Comment C'est, Watt, The Unnamable, Fin de partie, Happy Days ("How can better magnify the Almighty than by sniggering with him at his little jokes, particularly the poorer ones?") and in other texts, always showing a non-directional or a pluridirectional route where the purgatorial atmosphere is spherical and affects the narrative as a continuous turning back experience where a step forward is a step backward differently of that shaped by Dante, where the characters fight their sinful reality, purify themselves and go forward (actually in an ascending path) reaching their entrance in Paradise like in the Medieval Christian cosmogony. Beckett was truly interested in Purgatorio, explaining in his text Dante... Bruno, Vico... Joyce, written in 1928, that Inferno is a statical lack of life in a vicious way, Paradiso is a statical lack of life promoted by the immaculate condition, meanwhile Purgatorio is a movement between both, an "absolute lack of the absolute" (BECKETT, Op. Cit., p. 206).

Frasca (1988, p. 31) affirms that the Beckettian purgatorial space can be considered infernalized or even paradisiac due to its non-progressive circularity, "l'introduzione dell'eternità (come cattiva infinità) nell'esistenza." ("The introduction of Eternity (as bad infinity) into existence"), an ontological difference between Beckett/Joyce's atmosphere and Dante's where life is fed by a progressive and teleological narrative with its target on the final salvation. That way, memory also conducts the character self-recognition into different narrative points. Through a specific contextual fragment with chronological and geographical well defined borders – edges that work as a background for this pieces – both authors speak about constant and timeless questions faced by the human condition, and the mode through which the characters face their realities (punitive or beatifying) is related with how their memories review their previous experiences. In Dante's, the memory of the travelers are external to their knowledge as a kind of return that makes possible revisiting their memories. In the circularity of Beckett/Joyce's this experience is described from inside as a never-ending situation where past and present are mixed in a misrepresented time understanding. Another important topic is that Steiner had suggested in his book The Death of Tragedy about the fact that Western thought has lost its attachment with ancient and medieval myths. The weakening of the Christian view and of its dissipation into the Western societies added to the post-war reality put us far away from that universo dantesco – therefore also far away from a proper comprehension of this social and cultural landscape – as well as weaves an abyss between the universe build under the contemporary optics (Beckett) and that medieval sight watered by the Christian perspective aura (Dante).

Nell'età di Dante, la mente spaziava nel mondo come in un dramma dell'esistenza di Cristo. Quell'esistenza e il miracolo dell'incarnazione davano forma e scopo alla realtà. Essa risplendeva nel tremolo della foglia e nella caduta della stella, invitando l'anima a un pellegrinaggio

di grazia. Ogni oggetto e grado di esperienza, ogni fatto palese e causa ipotetica, erano contenuti nella “vera mitologia” della Chiesa e nelle sue convenzioni rituali e sacramentali. Questa mitologia che abbracciava la vita come l’unica e nemmeno la principale configurazione del pensiero occidentale. Qua e là va già rovinando. I santi non poggiano più i loro ardenti piedi negli alti luoghi. I riti si son ridotti a cerimonie vuote di significato e le labbra si muovono per mascherare il silenzio del cuore. Ciononostante il simbolismo cristiano e il contesto del pensiero cristiano. Il poeta cristiano moderno è più vicino a Dante di quanto Racine fosse vicino a Euripide.” (STEINER, 1992, p. 286).

Translation: In the age of Dante, the mind moved in the world as in a drama of Christ's being. That being and the miracle of its incarnation gave to reality its design and purpose. It shone through the trembling of the leaf and the falling of the star, soliciting the soul to a pilgrimage of grace. All matter and degrees of experience, all observed fact and conjectured cause, were comprehended in the "true mythology" of the church and in its conventions of rite and sacrament. This mythology, spanning life like the high-flung arch of a Gothic nave, is no longer the only or even the principal configuration of western thought. Here and there it is already in ruin. The saints no longer set their fiery feet on the high places. Rites have become ceremonies empty of belief and the lips intone to mask the silence in the heart. Nevertheless, Christian symbolism and the context of Christian meaning still temper the climate of western life. The modern Christian poet stands nearer to Dante than Racine stood to Euripides.

## O purgatório de Beckett através de Dante, Joyce e do Absurdo

### RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo desenvolver uma breve discussão sobre o teatro de Beckett, como este famoso autor irlandês leu a Divina Commedia de Dante e quão profundamente essa literatura influenciou em alguns aspectos (especialmente estéticos e narrativos) suas composições, bem como identificar algumas correlações entre a trajetória literária de Beckett e a experiência purgatorial desenvolvida por Dante. Em ambos os autores há um caminho pelo qual seus personagens enfrentam as forças universais e a possibilidade de superar seus pecados, purificar suas almas e alcançar outro estado de narrativa/ vivência pessoal. Não é possível seguir este caminho sem encarar Joyce como um meio termo entre o autor florentino e o dublinense, não como uma espécie de nível ascendente, mas como uma ponte que os conecta particularmente através da parceria Joyce-Beckett em *Ulisses* e como Beckett foi apresentado à *Commedia*, provavelmente em 1923-24.

**PALAVRAS/CHAVE:** Tennessee Williams. Camino Real. Adorno. Samuel Beckett.

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