



2

“Nothing is more Real Than Nothing” A Reading of Beckett’s “Ping” as a Postmodern Text

Oya Batum Mentese

Raymond Federman, who was a close friend and mentor of Beckett, in his famous lecture “The Imagery Museum of Samuel Beckett” (2006) delivered following his friend’s death, has said about understanding Beckett that one should not even try, instead one should use one’s sense and imagination to appreciate the imagery of “Sam’s text painting” for adds Federman,

Beckett who could have been himself a great painter, became that painter in his work. He painted beautiful tableaux for us with words rather than with paint.

(www.poeticinhalation.com/theimagerymuseumofsamuelbeckett.pdf)

Federman has asked us to take Beckett at his word, yet as one tries to decipher the structural and linguistic complexity of Beckett

“Nothing is more Real Than Nothing”
A Reading of Beckett’s “Ping” as a Postmodern Text

texts one inevitably or perhaps out of habit or academic curiosity tries to go beyond the technical innovativeness, to his meaning or purpose or at least to discovering the source of his artistic commitment.

Practically all Beckett texts have nontraditional narrative structures which quickly create enigmas for the reader; *Ping* published in 1966, one of the late works, rates among the most enigmatic. The enigma starts with the classification of the text within recognizable genres. What is *Ping*? Is it fiction or poetry? If fiction, is it a short story? Hugh Kenner has informed us that *Ping* was the residuum of a novel which Beckett began the year following its publication (1966). Yet *Ping* has widely been classified and analyzed as a poem due to its compactness and linguistic units which create rhythm. The original written in French and titled *Bing*, has also been treated both as fiction and as poetry. However you want to classify it, the text mocks the conventional conceptions of genres.

I read “Ping” as an early postmodern text (which may well be a short short story) the purpose of which seems on the part of its writer, to defamiliarize the readers with traditional literary forms and with known and recognized narrative and stylistic techniques including those of modernist writing, and which in turn reflects the texture of contemporary experience as random and meaningless, the way a postmodern writer would see it. Thus the term postmodern has proven to be a useful tool in talking about the enigma of *Ping*.

Samuel Beckett among the avant-garde of the 60s, has a strong claim to be considered as one of the first important postmodernist writers rather than the last of the modernists as many have seen him, it is true that his early work were written in the shadow of classical modernism, his early prose were studies on Joyce (1929) and Proust (1930) and in his first book of fiction *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934) he seemed to be imitating the various stories in Joyce’s *Dubliners* particularly the opening story “Dante and the Lobster”. Beckett takes the name of Belaque, the name of the protagonist, from a figure in Dante’s *Purgatorio*. The mythical parallel is there and is extensively used as a modernist writer would have it and yet; David Lodge has observed in his *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977) that;

Up to a point, “Dante and the Lobster” responds to the same kind of reading as an episode of *Ulysses*, as a narrative of modern life which alludes to a prior myth that is in some sense a key to its meaning ...

But adds Lodge,

[...]

in Beckett’s fiction... the “mythical method”... of ordering, of giving shape and significance to “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history” (as T. S. Eliot said of Joyce) disappears, is displaced by a growing insistence that there is no order, no shape or significance to be found anywhere (222-223).

Likewise, Hugh Kenner has claimed that though Beckett seemed to be imitating the various stories in Joyce’s *Dubliners* in *More Pricks Than Kicks* he was actually “parodying” the master and detaching himself from Modernism (53), for Beckett’s language never imposes order upon the chaos of meaninglessness and shapelessness that is modern experience, his very language creates the chaos and the meaninglessness.

Hugh Kenner again observes that, though Beckett’s earlier works were more expressive and readerly, suddenly in mid-sixties “ultra-compression” became his mode and he started to create, “a relentless externality, in which no one speaks and the very words before us seem not to be spoken, not really even written”(180) the externality are he adds, “always accessory to human action and he somehow creates a narrative in the absence of happenings” (180).

“Ping” begins like a modernist text, there is a stream of consciousness, a narrator defining a setting, a physical space and its position in this physical space, yet the reader suddenly realizes that everything is very vague and unclear; the identity of the stream

"Nothing is more Real Than Nothing"
A Reading of Beckett's "Ping" as a Postmodern Text

of consciousness is firstly sexually ambiguous, is it a he or a she? Then its existence is ambivalent, is there really a speaker? Is the speaker a person in the text or outside the text? Is there more than one person?

Where is this space within which the person is situated? What is the person talking about? Is it a past which is being recalled as we understand from references to a "memory" or is a present being unfolded? The minute you think you have found a coherence, which makes meaning, its frustrated and all sense of clarity is lost. One does not get a sense of plot; since practically no verbs are used, there is no action except for the transition from "fixed" to "fixed elsewhere", there is no character development either, but a view of language in structures, which have contradictory and clashing meanings, thus language instead of creating meaning and continuity creates uncertainties of meaning and discontinuity, within a narrative that is compressed into a small area, like the space it describes, and continues unbroken and unparagraphed.

It is possible to detect a seeming linguistic pattern based on the repetition of certain key words, and phrasal structures. Because the repetitions are based on a limited number of words, the pattern created is monotonous. David Lodge in his famous essay "Some Ping Understood" (1968) calls attention to "permutation" in "Ping"; to the repetition of unusually limited number of words in various combinations, he observes that there are only a few words that occur only once; other words are used at least twice and most more than twice, the word white more than ninety times, and adds;

It is this kind of repetition with variation that makes *Ping* so difficult to read, and the label "anti-literature" a plausible one. Repetition is often a key to meaning in literary discourse, but repetition on this scale tends to defeat the pursuit of meaning. (85)

One of the key words “white” as Lodge has noticed, is repeated more than 100 times, there seems to be no rational explanation why it is repeated so many times, unless one thinks, to justify Federman, of a colour pattern; white seems to be the dominant colour in the text, defining both the space and the narrator. White firstly is the colour of the space within which the body is placed. “White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen”. Whiteness is also the colour of the body or the narrator, if it has a corporal existence, “Bare white body fixed only the eyes only just” yet, the eyes, “barely see the white space and almost never know the whole”.

White is a colour which absorbs all other colours into a monotony, a colourlessness, in the text. Other colours appear in traces of brush strokes, soon dissolving into the whiteness. Traces of black light, turn grey; light grey turns white, the light blue of the eyes are almost white. “White on white” or “all white, all known white” erases almost everything out of existence. “Traces blur sings no meaning light grey almost”.

The word “light” which appears from time to time does not add “brightness” or “clarity” to the overall whiteness. The word light is either used as an adjective to mean weak such as “light heat”, “light grey” or “light blue” or used as a noun as in “blue light” or “black light” and in such a phrase as “one second light time” to indicate a time span which is very short.

‘Ping’ is the most ambiguous word in the text and is repeated more than twenty times at crucial moments and is onomatopoeic, it is like the sound of water or some object dropping on some surface, it drops on the whiteness to bring the reader out of the hypnotic trance of the whiteness to an awareness of a narrator, a thought stream within the text.

Does the stream of thought belong to this word or name Ping?. Does this word indicate a person? Or is it a sound which comes from outside? The word Ping largely seems to point to a person but who the person may be is not clear for the memory is very weak. Phrases such as “Ping murmurs perhaps a nature one second almost never that

"Nothing is more Real Than Nothing"
A Reading of Beckett's "Ping" as a Postmodern Text

much memory almost never" and "ping a meaning only just almost never" contradict one another.

Is "Ping" a meaning or is it the murmurer or is there another being inside or outside the text? Lines such as: "Ping perhaps not alone one second with image always the silence" and "murmurs only just almost never one second perhaps not alone" increase the ambivalence of the presence.

The juxtaposition of contradicting adverbs of place time and degree such as "just almost never perhaps" make specification of meaning impossible and end each statement with an anti-climax. The situation indicated by the consciousness stream seems never to be the same, yet never much different either: "all known murmurs only just almost never always the same". The space, which is of minimal dimensions, is a hellish one like a torture chamber with its "strange heat" and "strange light". The speaker or narrator is in this space in a position that is tortuous with hands hanging, palms front, feet and heels at right angle, "joined like sewn", mouth white like "sewn invisible". It's existence within this space is both painful and absurd reflecting a view of life similar to the modernist existentialist's view of life.

Existentialist modernists believed in the absurdity of life but they also believed in choice. To them life was meaningless, existence painful (as it seems to be in Beckett's text) but the individual could make a choice between life and death. Sartre termed it as a realization that in human life existence comes before essence. Camus saw man arriving through admission of absurdity to an affirmation of his own worth.

Whereas in Beckett's world there is no choice between life and death, no moment of turning existence into value; existence which in itself is very precarious, is pure meaninglessness and, absurdity a continuum, deterioration a finality, the inevitable end.

In "Ping", too the narrator, has no choice, even from the beginning it is slowly and consistently and continually deteriorating as expressed in the phrase "a little less blue gradually", parallel to its

deterioration the memory too is failing: “a meaning that much memory almost never”, little traces of meaning which may have been detected or uncovered in the narrative are quickly blurred by “black grey-light” turning white, the colour of nothingness.

The colour rose which appears in traces adds to the picture of deterioration. Under the whiteness of the narrator’s skin his pink flesh is visible, as he deteriorates his nails fall hair grows long and white scars appear: “White scars invisible same white as flesh torn of old given rose only just.”

His last memory is of “A far flash of time all white all over all of old ping flash white, walls shining” and the last colour he sees all around is white, “one only shining white infinite” his last murmur, “heart breath no sound” as his “unlustrous black and white half closed long lashes” are imploring the end comes “ping silence ping over”. The text ends.

“Ping” as a text challenges all literary norms and mocks the conventional fictional approaches to space and time; plot, action, physical appearance, character, narration and all claims to meaning. Open endings of modernist texts which don’t resolve anything but which in some way make sense of the various elements appearing in the course of the narration, do not exist in “Ping” any more than in any other Beckett text. Furthermore “Ping” mocks the conventional stylistic expectations, the narrative is more concealing than revealing, for words and phrases continually negate each other and whatever traces of meaning there may be are quickly exhausted.

Artistically “Ping” is of course a masterpiece of language. The rhythm of sentences, the scantiness of data, the unbroken flow of words and phrases not meaningful maybe but symmetrically juxtaposed on the level of syntax, seeming patterns of key words which reflect incoherence within a seeming coherence all placed skilfully within the unparagraphed narrative are unquestionably the work of a genius. Yet search we do for meaning or for some justification for the kind of textuality Beckett has produced, as many Beckett, scholars and critiques have done.

“Nothing is more Real Than Nothing”
A Reading of Beckett’s “Ping” as a Postmodern Text

In the 60s “Ping” was at the centre of the “anti-literature” debate. Ihab Hassan in his essay “Literature of Silence” had seen “Ping” as part of what he called a “literature which turns against itself” and “aspires to silence” (qtd. in Lodge, 1968).

David Lodge opposes this view and claims again in his famous essay “Some Ping Understood” that “the language of Ping is not void”; “... the piece has got syntax; it is rudimentary, but it does control the possible range of meaning” (87). Lodge was among those who saw “Ping” “as the rendering of a certain kinds of experience and having a perceptible design” thus to him in “Ping” “Words do not merely demonstrate their emptiness. It is, like any literary artefact, a marriage of form and meaning” (89).

Contrarily Marjorie Perloff in an essay “In Love with Hiding: Samuel Beckett’s War” has claimed that it was wrong to read Beckett as addressing “man’s alienation” and the “human condition” but to read him in the light of his Second World War experiences in France which he never spoke of directly. (*The Iowa Review*, Spring, 2005)

Hugh Kenner has a similar view: Kenner claims that Beckett’s Paris experience under Nazi occupation was so overwhelming that it affected his creative process; “a sense of having been solicited by realities so nearly unbearable that art can only come to terms with them slowly, through substitutions” (73).

Richard Ellmann sees Beckett’s trilogy as giving voice to “the decrepit and maimed and inarticulate”, “men and women at the end of their tether, past pose and pretense, past claim of meaningful existence”. (*The Samuel Beckett On-Line Resources and Links Pages: New York Times Book Review*, 1997).

Beckett is either liked or disliked, but never indifferently received. His biographer Anthony Cronin tells us how at the time of the publication of *Murphy*, a well known Irish novelist Kate O’Brain reviewed the novel. She described it as a “truly magnificent novel” “allusive, brilliant, impudent and rude” (295) and “a treasure if you like it. Quite useless to you, quite idiotic if you don’t” (295). Cronin observes that Beckett in his later work (the group to which *Ping* belongs)

was actually writing about his own demise, hence the darkness and the despair.

Yet, bleakness, darkness and despair are the common attributes of all Beckett novels and fiction not only of *Ping*. In all Beckett novels, even in the most readerly ones, experience is totally purposeless, meaningless and bizarre which in turn create the darkness and the despair. All end with nothing resolved, a sense of futility or of utter hopelessness. Even his early and most popular play *Waiting for Godot* (1954) ends with this sense of futility, an endless waiting for that uncertain something that will never come or be.

His mature novels too develop along similar lines. In their worlds experience is bizarre all is provisional and hypothetical uncertainty reigns, nothing is explicable and nothing means anything and a sense of futility and an atmosphere of darkness envelope all. Why for example, is the protagonist in *Murphy* (1939) tied naked to a rocking chair and is rocking back and forth in the dark in his apartment as the novel opens? In *Malone Dies* (1955) why are all Malone's possessions taken away from him except an exercise book, a brimless hat and a pencil, as he lies again naked in bed within an unidentifiable space? In his stream of memory he talks about having killed several people for no valid reason and at the end of the novel one of the nurses who take Malone and some others on a picnic murders two of them again for no valid reason and what is more, all these bizarre events are narrated matter of factly. The novel resumes with Malone holding the bloody hatchet and saying that the nurse will not kill anyone with a hatchet anymore or with anything else for that matter.

The Unnamable (1954), the third novel of the famous trilogy is a monologue from the perspective of an unnamed and unnamable character who has no voice but must speak any way and thus mocks the conventions of the narrator, his disjointed recollections end with the very famous lines;

perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of
my story, before the door that opens on my story,
that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I.

“Nothing is more Real Than Nothing”
A Reading of Beckett’s “Ping” as a Postmodern Text

It will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know.
I will never know, in the silence you don’t know.
You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on. (www.
samuel-beckett.net/unnamable)

Is it possible to assume that perhaps Beckett himself is speaking in these lines about his own writing?

Beckett’s biographer Cronin gives us a different reading of these lines than the usual. He claims that these words have been taken out of context and have been seen like Molly Blooms famous “yes”, “as an affirmation of something or other”, since observes Cronin. “They come at the end of an immensely long sentence which closes a paragraph of over 100 pages”(401).

[...] But perhaps [he adds]. The trilogy is a sort of epic, written in the only terms in which it may be possible to construct an epic today one in which the heroic ideal is heroic only, justifiable by no theology or system of ethics. The imperative is speech, a perhaps pointless utterance, an expression of the human state for its own sake, no more; but this utterance must continue and this record of the human state must be made. (401)

Even though Cronin sees Beckett as a late modernist as the title of his book tells us, by emphasizing Beckett’s language use as a “pointless utterance, an expression of the human state for its own sake no more” he places Beckett within postmodernism and justifies David Lodge’s view that “Ping” is “a marriage of form and meaning” the utterance recording a human state.

Whatever personal experience may lie behind it, as an artist Beckett is an early postmodern writer with a world view of a meaningless

and absurd existence in an indifferent absurd universe in which experience is random and value is provisional and the supporting view of narrative art which defies all literary and linguistic conventions and defamiliarizes us with traditional conceptions of fiction writing. As David Lodge has put it, in this sense his work is “a marriage of form and meaning”.

But the large alternative interpretations show that we in our century tend to read different meanings into his art. When interpretations are exhausted what do Beckett texts offer the reader for enjoyment? Unfortunately the texts themselves don't raise that question. If anything the texts offer, is a high degree of awareness of language. Reading a Beckett text to agree with Federman, is to lose oneself in the power and momentum of words, to the point of forgetting meaning; the enjoyment may well be in that and as to meaning in Beckett's world, he seems to say as in *Malone Dies*, “Nothing is more real than Nothing” it is his meaning as a human subject at a time and at a place.

WORKS CITED

- Beckett, Samuel. “Ping.” Ed. Malcolm Bradbury. *Modern British Short Stories*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1988.
- Beckett, Samuel. *The Unnamable*. www.samuel-beckett.net/unnamable
- Cronin, Anthony. Samuel Beckett. *The Last Modernist*. New York: Da Capo, 1977.
- Federman, Raymond. 2006. “The Imagery Museum of Samuel Beckett”.
www.poeticintatiation.com/raymondfederman_theimagerymuseumofsamuelbeckett.pdf
- Kenner, Hugh. *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*. 1973. New York; Syracuse UP, 1996.

“Nothing is more Real Than Nothing”
A Reading of Beckett’s “Ping” as a Postmodern Text

Lodge, David. “Some Ping Understood” *Encounter* February, 1968.

Lodge, David. *The Modes of Modern Writing*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977.

Perloff, Marjorie. “In Love with Hiding: Samuel Beckett’s War”. *The Iowa Review*, Spring, 2005.

The Samuel Beckett On-Line Resources and Links Pages: *New York Times Book Review*, 1997.