

Nikolai Duffy, “Against Metaphor: Samuel Beckett and the Influence of Science.” *Diacritics* 41.4 (2013): 36-58.

How can “mess” be turned into a structural principle? According to Nikolai Duffy the attempt to answer such a question informs much of Samuel Beckett’s late writings from *The Unnamable* until the end of his life. Language is an ordering device, and metaphors and analogies have always been considered its most efficient agents. They establish relations between distant signifiers and generate meaning within a conventional shared code. How then can language “stage the ‘mess’ in language” (44)? “Shall we escape analogy” (49)?

Duffy suggests that an understanding of the influence of modern physics on Beckett’s experimental poetics could reveal “interesting ways for thinking about new and innovative methods of writing that both reflect and structurally incorporate some of the central ideas that define the contemporary period” (44).

The very structure of the article seems to represent a creative attempt to constantly avoid the idea of a system: the unitary structure of a classic paper is shattered into a collection of fragmentary reflections – possibly a representation of Beckett’s “egregious gaps” (48) – that allude to meaning through contiguity rather than continuity.

In the first six fragments, Duffy introduces the classic nodes of Beckett’s poetics (rhetoric of impotence, limits of empiricism and the influence of Arnold Geulincx) as interpreted by previous studies of Beckett in juxtaposition (but without any explicit explanation) with Emmanuel Levinas’ ideas on skepticism and Nietzsche’s reflections on the philosophical implications of fragmentary forms. While previous scholarship focused on establishing textual and thematic correspondences between Beckett’s work and modern physics, Duffy seems to argue that the new philosophical implications of quantum mechanics shape the very form of Beckett’s writing more than acting simply at the level of content.

Quantum physics reveals a fundamental linguistic divergence between the new subatomic reality and the classical means of representation, while paradoxically depending on those same classical concepts for an unambiguous communication of the experiment. It is a “fundamental paradox” (40), as Werner Heisenberg defines it, and it cannot be avoided. The same paradox, Duffy seems to suggest, lurks in Beckett’s resistance to analogy through grammatical and syntactical experimentations. Language is, for Beckett, something a writer has to drill into in order to release the something or nothing that lies behind the word, but the drill is language itself. As Niels Bohr, one of the fathers of quantum physics and an egregious absence in this article, famously claimed: “We are suspended in language in such a way that we cannot say what is up and what is down. The word ‘reality’ is also a word, a word which we must learn to use correctly” (Aage Petersen. “The Philosophy of Niels Bohr.” *Niels Bohr. A Centenary Volume*. Ed. A.P.French and P.J.Kennedy. Harvard UP, 1985. 302).

Beckett’s writing, from *Echo’s Bones* to the “third zone of Murphy’s mind” (47) to *Worstward Ho*, “screens a spacing of movement that, like the incoherent continuum, excepts analogy, metaphor, that turns inside out the common structures of reference and designation and leaves them hanging” (48). According to Duffy, there is no closure in Beckett’s last works, but a multiplication of gaps and tears in the surface

that turn the common relations between written and non-written world into non-relations.

The paper seems to obey a sort of self-referential logic: it explores atomistic, anti-metaphorical forms of expressions while being fragmented itself. Meaning is evoked by association, suggested through quotes from other authors rather than stated. From Royet-Journoud's interest in "minimal units of meaning" and "avoidance of assonance, alliteration, metaphor" (50), to Rosmarie Waldrop's preference for a "horizontal axis of combination, context, contiguity, syntax and metonymy" (50).

The impossible epistemological unity staged in Beckett's narrative as a constant tension between the presence of the signifier and the perpetually differed signified, is reflected in the open ending of the article, which enacts a process of "atomization" that breaks down the system into its most elementary parts. In the concluding fragments, every vestige of linear logic crumbles apart culminating in a series of quotes on the possibility of "silence" and the limits of language from Beckett himself, Lacan, Deleuze, Heidegger, Susan Howe and Blanchot. Nothing holds together in the never-ending drift of meaning.

The form of the fragment, being simultaneously a broken part of a whole and a semi-autonomous entity, is an interesting device that alludes to knowledge *in absentia*, calling for an unusual mode of perception and reception that defies the common univocal association of meaning and representation. The article usefully points to the significance of science for the form, as opposed to the content, of Beckett's work. However, the reader is left with a sense of frustrated expectation that mirrors the famous concluding line of *Waiting for Godot*: "'Yes. Let's go.' *They do not move*," but at the same time with a surplus of literary knowledge accumulated in the process of filling in the gaps in Duffy's argument.

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