

## **Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

---

Amin Erfani

---

Date

Breath and Whispers:  
The “Theatrical” Writings of Beckett, Koltès, Novarina, and Derrida

By

Amin Erfani  
Ph.D.

French Literature

---

Geoffrey Bennington, Ph.D.  
Advisor

---

Claire Nouvet, Ph.D.  
Advisor

---

Christophe Bident, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Elissa Marder, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

Accepted:

---

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.  
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

---

Date

Breath and Whispers:  
The “Theatrical” Writings of Beckett, Koltès, Novarina, and Derrida

By

Amin Erfani  
M.A., Stony Brook University, 2004

Advisor: Geoffrey Bennington, Ph.D.  
Advisor: Claire Nouvet, Ph.D.

An abstract of  
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in French Literature  
2011

## ABSTRACT

### Breath and Whispers: The “Theatrical” Writings of Beckett, Koltès, Novarina, and Derrida

by Amin Erfani

This dissertation examines the status of “theater” in the works of three playwrights and a philosopher, in late twentieth and early twenty first century. In the wake of Antonin Artaud, a particular form of “theatrical writing” challenges the fundamental structure of Western thought, still grounded in the notion of *mimesis* since Aristotle’s *Poetics*. This writing seeks to establish a “primal theater” *prior* to representation, recognition, or identification. Relying on incantatory enunciations, it rejects mimetic language, discursive articulation, and conceptual interpretation. As a result, this writing exceeds the category of any single form or genre, be it drama, literature, philosophy, or autobiography. Its structure relies, I argue, on a distinctive notion of “*souffle*.” The “breath” or “whisper” carries the speaker’s voice, while it simultaneously interrupts its transparency and robs it of its discursive ability. I read this resistance to communication as a process of transmission of affect through speech enactment, rather than a transaction of meaning through structured discourse. The inarticulate quality of this writing follows the injunction to infiltrate into language what these authors commonly call their private “incomprehensible mother tongue.” Indeed, their writing is constantly in dialogue with the evading and mute “mother.” I analyze “her” inscription in the text as both a “real” figure and a movement of discursive erasure, which establishes the act of writing prior to the separation of “text” from “life.” My first chapter demonstrates how Samuel Beckett’s later texts suffer from self-erasure under the rule of maternal repudiation, triggering an insatiable need for *shifting* between languages, genres, and media, to a point of utter disarticulation. The second chapter examines Bernard-Marie Koltès’ inaugural and elliptical monologues as failed efforts to reclaim the omniscient yet unintelligible maternal body, which structures the entirety of his theatrical work. The third chapter shows that Valère Novarina’s self-generating and notoriously inarticulate texts for the theater emerge from an insatiable desire to be reborn through writing. My final chapter focuses on Jacques Derrida’s call for “theoretical” writing to become elliptically “theatrical,” a call that I read as an attempt to mourn the dying figure of the mother.

Breath and Whispers:  
The “Theatrical” Writings of Beckett, Koltès, Novarina, and Derrida

By

Amin Erfani  
M.A., Stony Brook University, 2004

Advisor: Geoffrey Bennington, Ph.D.  
Advisor: Claire Nouvet, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in French Literature  
2011

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Claire Nouvet for her unwavering support, presence, and friendship, acting as an irreplaceable intellectual guide at every step of the way of this dissertation. Dr. Geoffrey Bennington has always been for me a true *master* in the theoretical field, from before I came to Emory University, even more so today, and for a long time to come. I would like to thank Dr. Elissa Marder for her support, presence, and intellectual help during critical times in my research and graduate career. Without my encounter and long-standing friendship with Dr. Christophe Bident, my entire approach to the field of theater would have equally been a missed encounter.

This dissertation was also made possible by the 2006 *Thomas M. Hines French Studies Scholarship* and the 2010 *Anne Amari Perry Award*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. SAMUEL BECKETT: THE UNSPEAKABLE LAW OF THEATRICAL WRITING.....	20
II. KOLTÈS-NARCISSUS: THE GENESIS OF THEATRICAL WRITING.....	67
III. <i>LE THÉÂTRE DES PAROLES</i> : THE STAGE OF THE INFANT TONGUE.....	120
IV. THE END OF THEORY IS JUST THE BEGINNING: OF BLOOD IN JACQUES DERRIDA'S <i>CIRCONFESSIO</i> .....	172
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	208

## Introduction

Antonin Artaud will have been one of the *events* of the twentieth and twenty first century. His impact runs through the entire human sciences, ranging from theater to fields such as aesthetics, the clinical, the analytical, philosophy, or the political. But as for any *event* worthy of the name, Artaud's impact remains irreducible to these categorical fields, and starts being measured only *after the fact*. Assessments of it remain still today incomplete, and its aftershock still unpredictable. After spending nine years in different mental institutions, Artaud died in 1948, the same year his notorious recording of *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*, with Roger Blin and Maria Casarès, was denied broadcasting, at the very last minute, by French radio. Following his death, a number of prominent artistic figures, particularly in the theater, have proclaimed themselves or have been proclaimed as "Artaudians." Involved from early on in the limited *critical* debate of the time on Artaud, Jacques Derrida published his two first essays on him in 1967: « Le Théâtre de la cruauté et la clôture de la représentation » and « La Parole soufflée. » Both of these major readings were published in a book entitled *l'Écriture et la différence*.<sup>1</sup> Not coincidentally, this book was one of Derrida's first three published works, all in the same year, 1967, alongside *De la Grammatologie* and *La Dissémination*, defining the starting point of Derrida's own career. Derrida solidified further his impact on "Artaudian

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence*, Editions du Seuil, 1967, hereafter referred to as ED.



scholarship,” decades later, publishing another study entitled *Artaud le Moma*,<sup>2</sup> in 2002, continuing to argue, along the same lines as his first essays, for the *impossibility* of the reduction of Artaud’s writing to notions of “corpus,” “legacy,” or “institution.”

Throughout this study, I will elaborate a notion of “theatrical writing” through a particular reading of Artaud that would have been impossible without Derrida’s unprecedented readings in his two first essays. To a large extent, one may contend that the singularity of Artaud’s writing would have remained something of a *missed encounter* with the *critical* field, had Derrida not thoroughly argued for the impossibility of categorizing his texts, as “example” of “madness” finding haven or justification in “literature,” in light of an utterly imitable form of speech, called *la parole soufflée*. In fact, Derrida’s reception of Artaud remains, still today, unique. It is impossible to read Artaud after Derrida without considering his essays, or read Derrida without finding Artaud embedded in his corpus from the beginning, Artaud’s imprint omnipresent in Derrida’s own writing, which I will argue to be, in its own singular way, *theatrical*. Still today, there is a lack of acknowledgment of the encounter between Derrida and Artaud, as a *singular* event in the field of critical reading, which often manifests itself in the form of broad denial. Such is particularly the case when it comes to Derrida’s potential impact in the discipline of “theater studies,” or the necessity of “theatricality” within contemporary theoretical writing. The following, for example, demonstrates a case of a *missed encounter* of the structural proximity of (Derridean) theory and (Artaudian) theater, a passage extracted from the general introduction of a book on Bernard-Marie Koltès, by Donia Mounsef, from 2005, where the author relies significantly on

---

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Artaud le Moma*, Galilée, 2002.

“postmodern” thinkers to articulate what she also calls, in light of Artaud, Koltès’s “postmodern theater.” While engaging in the theoretical articulation of this “postmodern theater,” the author remains strangely silent about Derrida’s engagement with theatrical speech, as particularly elaborated in the notion of *la parole soufflée*, already set in place in 1967. Instead, she chooses to argue for the *incompatibility* of deconstruction and “*la parole théâtrale*,” depicting Derrida’s work as entirely undermining notions of “*énonciation*” and “*parole*,” and seemingly prejudiced in favor of “*l’univers scriptural*”:

En refusant le privilège logocentrique de la parole et en déclarant que cette dernière contient toujours la trace de l’écriture, Derrida a rejeté et subverti les actes de la parole tout en assujettissant le *gestus* verbal à la seule permanence possible de l’univers scriptural. Depuis, la textualité a été proclamée comme « l’inconditionnel environnement » sans lequel il n’y aurait pas de représentation. Or « cette revanche de l’écriture », à part sa réductibilité de la parole, son dispersement de l’acte de l’énonciation et son renforcement des modes de jeux textuels, cache un déséquilibre. En effet, tel qu’il sera question grâce à l’analyse de l’œuvre de Koltès, la textualité est toujours infiltrée par l’énonciation, et l’écriture, par l’acte de la parole.<sup>3</sup>

The text as the locus of *enunciation* – the space for the *signature*, in Derridian “terminology” – has always been an omnipresent and intrinsic dimension of deconstruction, and far from dismissing “speech” in favor of “writing,” any accurate

---

<sup>3</sup> Donia Mounsef, *Chair et révolte dans le théâtre de Bernard-Marie Koltès*, Collection Univers théâtrale, L’Harmattan, 2005, 16.

rendition of Derrida's project must take into account the *declared* principle that these two structures are in fact the *same*, both equally subject to *iterability*. Derrida's early strategic practice of *paleonymy*, consisting in using an ordinary term, such as *écriture*, to designate a structure that entirely exceeds the word's given definition (in this instance, incorporating the very structure of *parole*), has always been a cause for confusion, and often, as in the quoted passage, broad dismissal. Were Derrida not to include, *literally*, the notion of *parole*, in the context of Artaud's theater, already in 1967, the complexity of Derrida's reading might have allowed slightly more leeway for such a consequential exclusion.

Just as importantly, Derrida's own work, in turn, embraces a very unique form of "theatricality" or "theatrical writing" – one may depict it as Derrida's own *parole soufflée* – which distinguishes him from a great majority of contemporary theoreticians, with some exceptions such as Jean-François Lyotard, or even Jacques Lacan. Derrida's very singular approach to language indicates still another dimension of Artaud's presence early on in his corpus, at the time of the inception of what will later be called "deconstruction." One of the major stakes of this study, in reading Derrida alongside Beckett, Koltès, and Novarina, will be to account for the *necessity* of "theatricality" in the very structure of "theory," as Derrida demonstrates this quite uniquely. We will find that the notion of "theater" resists conceptual reduction and "theoretical" systematicity, working instead the structure of the text from within. On the one hand, one may indeed read *critically* the notion of "*la parole soufflée*" as a Derridian "term." On the other hand, one may read the ways in which "*la parole soufflée*" is also at work in Derrida's own writing process. But in fact these are *not* two separate projects. Accounting for Derrida's

resistance to the “concept” is to account for Derrida’s own text undergoing a particular process of “performativity” which resists, *in writing*, conceptual clarity, pedagogical articulation, and at times, even linguistic transparency. Again, this resistance to “theoretical” discourse has continuously provoked either sheer dismissal of deconstruction because of an alleged “obscurity,” or else a challenge to articulate discursively, pedagogically, and efficiently, a Derridian “system of thought” *despite* Derrida’s own writing process.

Displacing Derrida from his privileged territory of philosophy to stand alongside Beckett, Koltès, and Novarina, I intend to account for a “theatrical writing” that *precedes* the possibility of separating critical, dramatic, literary, even autobiographical discourses. In effect, few works have engaged with the “theatrical” dimension of “theoretical” writing, which accordingly qualifies as neither *drama* nor *theory*, per se. A more recent work by Asja Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature*, convincingly reconciles Beckett’s work, as a *literary* event exceeding formalization, with Derrida’s own exceptional hospitality toward the event of literature within the conceptual realm of philosophy. Doing so, Szafraniec argues for a prevalence of “literature” over “philosophy,” as the former, according to Derrida’s own words, denotes the only “institution” that constitutes simultaneously a “counter-institution,” insofar as it defines itself by its ability to *re-define* itself constantly and unpredictably, its originary rule being to challenge its own discursive rules, which allegedly no other institution is inclined to do as effectively and as radically. This line of argumentation, implying a complex notion of the “revenge of literature” over “philosophy,” is, however, still confined in a confrontational debate between disciplines and discursive practices. While the notion of

*singularity* remains central to Szafranec's articulation of eventhood in both Beckett's "literary" writing and Derrida's "philosophical" work, the question still lingers as to whether the singularity of writing, Derrida and Beckett's, may overwhelm or even *precede* the problematic of disciplinary affiliations and genre. Should Derrida's own writing, seeking to infiltrate the *event* into the boundaries of philosophical discourse, thus constantly challenging its institutional rules, be accordingly categorized as "literary" as well? Indeed, what is the status of Derrida's own singular writing prior to a "deconstructive methodology" or "terminologies," which are abundantly recuperated by commentators, including myself, as "theoretical" tools for our own discursive purposes? May Derrida's own signature – which somewhat precedes his methodological elaboration of the notion of "signature" – be simply dispensed with in favor of "deconstruction"? After all, contrary to Beckett, Derrida never had explicitly any literary ambition, at least in his published works. But can his writing be deemed simply "philosophical," or even affected by some "literary" momentum or inspiration, separate from the fact that he constantly *reads* literary texts by other authors? In emphasizing the theatricality of Derrida's own writing (his very own *parole soufflée*) in resonance with Beckett, Koltès, and Novarina, I intend to argue for a singularity which not only resists categorical affiliation, but which both precedes and allows for – *in a writing* – any notion of discursive and methodological articulation. Our reading of *Circonfession*, in particular, seeks to underscore Derrida's singular voice, his notoriously elliptical, and *inimitable* writing, as having precedence over "deconstruction" as a methodology, while at the same time challenging, in its own right, its affiliation to, and the stability of, categories such as "philosophy" or "literature." Indeed, Derrida, Beckett, Koltès, and Novarina, may find

each other most and foremost in the singularity of their voices prior to any categorization of their texts as “drama,” “literary,” or “philosophical.”

Following my own *paleonymic* use of the term “theater,” I will demonstrate that “theater” has always *preceded* any possibility of established institution, discursive rules, and genre, particularly that of “drama,” while participating in a primary function both *generative* and *disruptive* of those categories. Theatricality thus may account for the necessity of a singular writing *prior* to categorical distinction, in accordance with the event of Artaud’s singular Theater of Cruelty.

### **The Theater of Cruelty**

Artaud’s impact on the fields of the human sciences finds its origin in his unprecedented redefinition of “theater” outside the restrictive field of drama as a genre. He effectively infiltrates into western theater, structurally indebted to Greek tragedy, a more primary, so-claimed “oriental” and non-Aristotelian conception, resonant with Balinese dance and Mexican tribal ceremonies of burials and healing. Artaud’s vision with respect to the theatrical apparatus aims at restoring an allegedly non-religious “mysticism” as the foundation of a non-dramatic theater. His reconfiguration of the theater as a privileged space for “magical” and “mystical” conjurations, reliant upon incantations and gestural invocations, « remet le théâtre à son plan de création autonome et pure, sous l’angle de

l'hallucination et de la peur » [TD 535].<sup>4</sup> Seeking to create the conditions for the possibility of “hallucinatory” apparitions rather than representation, Artaud rejects altogether the theater as a *fictionalized* space. In contrast to notions of fiction and mimetic illusion, his conjurations pertain to a “primal reality,” following the axiom: « faire entrer par ce moyen [l’incantation] la nature entière dans le théâtre » [TD 556]. More radically, he contends that in western culture, the theater proves to be the single and irreplaceable space for those “magical rites,” therefore acquiring an uncanny privilege over “real life,” where any of those practices would be deemed as “superstitions.”

This primary theater is the Theater of Cruelty (« j’ai donc dit ‘cruauté’ comme j’aurais dit ‘vie’ » [TD 575]), insofar as life, in its theatricality, escapes mimetic reduction : « quand nous prononçons le mot de vie, faut-il entendre qu’il ne s’agit pas de la vie reconnue par le dehors des faits, mais de cette sorte de fragile et remuant foyer auquel ne touchent pas les formes. » [TD 509]. The theater brings to life what life outside deems to be *formless* and can only repress (« Le théâtre est fait pour permettre à nos refoulements de prendre vie » [TD 506]): it conjures up a disruptive, transformative, and unpredictable force for which neither everyday life nor dramatic constructions can account. These conjurations allow for hallucinatory apparitions, the unknowable, unpredictable, and utterly disruptive Double, « le Double qui s’efface des ses apparitions de l’Au-delà [...] l’automatisme même de l’inconscient déchainé. » [TD 536]. Artaud is adamant that the notion of “cruelty” in the theater remains distinct from its common denomination as “intentional sadism.” It invokes rather unconscious forces generative of

---

<sup>4</sup> Antonin Artaud, “Le Théâtre et son double,” in *Œuvres*, Édition établie, présentée et annotée par Evelyne Grossman, Paris: Quatro Gallimard, 2004, 510, hereafter referred to as TD.

the Double, translating into a *necessary* violence disruptive of the individual's defense system. In these terms, the emergence of the Double *must* be violent, unpredictable, and therefore cruel to the individual. Dispensing with the defensive setup inherent in the structure of mimesis, dramatic plot, and characters, this theater seeks the immediacy, in Artaud's terms, of « une morsure concrète » [TD 556], « un théâtre qui nous réveille : nerfs et cœur » [TD 555]. Notions of wounds, disease, and « sensibilité » prevail over those of « intellect », « intelligence », or interpretation.

A fundamental outcome of this upheaval is Artaud's unequivocal rejection of western theater as centered around, shaped by, and subjected to the dramatic text. Provided that “psychological theater,” which he strongly rejects, is based on dialogical structures, storylines, and characters, set forth by the written manuscript of the play, the text must be put, at least, on the same level as the other media in the theater, which reversal has also become a founding principle of so-called *post-dramatic theater* in recent decades:<sup>5</sup>

C'est sous cet angle d'utilisation magique et de sorcellerie qu'il faut considérer la mise en scène, non comme le reflet d'un texte écrit et de toute cette projection de doubles physiques qui se dégage de l'écrit mais comme la projection brûlante de tout ce qui peut être tiré de conséquences objectives d'un geste, d'un mot, d'un son, d'une musique et de leurs combinaisons entre eux. Cette projection active ne peut se faire que sur la scène et ses conséquences trouvées devant la scène et sur la scène ; et l'auteur qui use exclusivement des mots écrits n'a que faire et doit céder la place à des spécialistes de cette sorcellerie objective et animée. [TD 548-549]

---

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Postdramatic Theatre*. translated and with an introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, London and New York 2006.



In Artaud's singular terms, the written text must be undermined in favor of the "magical" and incantatory dimension of theatrical "language" no longer used as predominantly a dramatic *tool*. The written play is put under erasure to uphold the immediate materiality of enacted language, unleashing its incantatory power with no mimetic impact, as it may occur nowhere else than on the theatrical stage. Far from positing a theater with *no* language, this erasure seeks instead an unprecedented reconfiguration of "theatrical language": « ce que le théâtre peut encore arracher à la parole, ce sont ses possibilités d'expansions hors des mots, de développement dans l'espace, d'action dissociatrice et vibratoire sur la sensibilité. C'est ici qu'interviennent les intonations, la prononciation particulière d'un mot, [...] langage dans l'espace, langage de sons, de cris, de lumières, d'onomatopées » [TD 558]. Artaud restores theater to its primary function, and by the same token "life" prior to mimesis, by attacking first and foremost the founding structures of language. Incantation as a form of enunciation subverts these signifying structures, instituting the theater to be fundamentally as *formless* as life itself : « Briser le langage pour toucher la vie, c'est faire ou refaire le théâtre » [TD 509]. The theater, *as* life or *before* life, must be structurally unstable, indefinable, non-identical to itself, ever-evolving.

Incantation, in the Artaudian sense, therefore challenges language as inscription, signification, and structure, privileging instead, to the point of utter disarticulation, the materiality of speech born from the urgent *necessity* of enunciation prior to discourse. Artaud accordingly differentiates *two* types of language, the signifying structure of spoken words on the one hand, and a fundamentally inarticulate language on the other:

Il s'agit de substituer au langage articulé un langage différent de nature, dont la possibilité expressive équivaldront au langage des mots, mais dont la source sera prise à un point encore plus enfoui et plus reculé de la pensée.

De ce nouveau langage la grammaire est encore à trouver. Le geste en est la matière et la tête ; et si l'on veut l'alpha et l'oméga. Il part de la NÉCESSITÉ de la parole beaucoup plus que de la parole déjà formée. Mais trouvant dans la parole une impasse, il revient au geste de façon spontanée. Il effleure en passant quelques-unes des lois de l'expression matérielle humaine. Il plonge dans la nécessité. Il refait poétiquement le trajet qui a abouti à la création de la langue. [TD 572]

The urgency of speech and the sheer *necessity* of enunciation prevail upon enunciated discourse, and translate, in Artaud's terms, as "gesture" rather than "content."

Incantation, in this theater, becomes speech *less* structured utterances. The act of speaking upsets, invalidates, and even more radically, for Artaud, puts spoken words under erasure. Enunciation, or inarticulate incantation, signals the possibility of another "language" altogether, surely inarticulate, but more *immediate* and *efficient*, quite "magically," than spoken words themselves: « j'ajoute au langage parlé un autre langage et j'essaie de rendre sa vieille efficacité envoûtante, intégrante au langage de la parole dont on a oublié les mystérieuses possibilités » [TD 572].

« *la parole soufflée* »

Derrida, of all the so-called “postmodern” thinkers, first and best articulates the double structure of this theatrical language in Artaud, through the notion of « *la parole soufflée*. » In Derrida’s reading, this inarticulate *parole* constitutes « la loi de l’écriture théâtrale », [ED, 287]. Following Artaud’s emphasis on the urgent necessity of « magical » incantations, Derrida asserts the necessity for the other “language”: « Pour que le théâtre ne soit soumis à cette structure de langage ni abandonné à la spontanéité de l’inspiration furtive, on devra le régler selon la nécessité d’un autre langage et d’une autre écriture » [ED 286]. The necessity of this other “language” calls for the structure of the notion of “*souffle*.” The “breath” carries the possibility of *la parole*, allows for its event, and yet at the same time robs its utterance of its discursive transparency. This inarticulate speech becomes *une parole soufflée*, which also means *whispered words* into the speaker’s ear, words whispered by a higher agency unknown to the speaking subject. In this paradoxical structure, *parole* does not belong to the speaker. This structure reveals a third dimension of *la parole soufflée*, being also *stolen words*. This *theft* belongs to the *other*, who, following the traditional function of *le souffleur* (the prompter) in the theater, knows the speaker’s words even before the speaker, and thus forbids the possibility of any *authentic* speech. It institutes the origin of speech in the *other*, who steals my words even before I speak them, possesses my language and operates at the same time from *outside* the realm of intelligibility. As Derrida puts it:

Soufflée : entendons dérobée par un commentateur possible qui la reconnaît pour la ranger dans un ordre, ordre de vérité essentielle ou de structure réelle, psychologique ou autre. [...] Soufflée : entendons du même coup inspirée depuis une autre voix, lisant elle-même un texte plus vieux que le poème de mon corps, que le théâtre du geste. L'inspiration, c'est, à plusieurs personnages, le drame du vol, la structure du théâtre classique où l'invisibilité du souffleur assure la différence et le relais indispensable entre un texte déjà écrit d'une autre main et un interprète déjà dépossédé de cela même qu'il reçoit. [ED 261-262]

This *parole soufflée* operates before (and accordingly invalidates) mimetic language. The paradoxical condition of enunciation (speech less spoken words) translates, for Artaud, in his notorious “intellectual cry,” which we can hear in the recording of *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*. This particular form of “cry” is subject to a double bind: it is *gifted* with a certain form of knowledge which conversely is reduced to an unintelligible state: « Tous les systèmes que je pourrai édifier n'égalent jamais mes cris d'homme occupé à refaire sa vie. [...] / Ces forces informulées qui m'assiègent, il faudra bien un jour que ma raison les accueille, qu'elle s'installent à la place de la haute pensée, ces forces qui du dehors ont la forme d'un cri. Il y a des cris intellectuels, des cris qui proviennent de la  *finesse* des moelles. C'est cela, moi, que j'appelle, la Chair. »<sup>6</sup> Artaud's “intellectual cry” distinguishes itself from other cries as it bears witness to both the necessity *and* the impossibility of speech, therefore failing to materialize into discourse. The cry yearns for meaning but remains deprived of spoken words. Indeed, the *event* of this particular cry

---

<sup>6</sup> Antonin Artaud, « Positions de la Chair », in *Œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004, 146-147, hereafter referred to as *Chair*.

bears witness to the *singularity* of the speaker's existence, the idiosyncrasy of his or her voice deprived from the possibility of repeatable utterances, and yet subject to an irrepressible *need* for enunciation. This structure of *theft*, in Artaud, is not confined to the notion of discursive speech alone, but to life itself, which has equally been stolen away. The cry thus follows the injunction to reaffirm one's own *existence* as authentically as possible: « Qui suis-je au milieu de cette théorie de la Chair ou pour mieux dire de l'Existence? Je suis un homme qui a perdu sa vie et qui cherche par tous les moyens à lui faire reprendre sa place » [Chair 147].

Derrida describes this dispossession through a very singular state of “unpower” (*impouvoir*) that is *neither active nor passive*. Depicting neither a state of complete submission, nor one of complete mastery, it denotes the condition of impossibility of both knowledge and speech. In this state, the speaker is nevertheless gifted, unknowingly and unwillingly, with *another* form of speech and knowledge, irreducible and unrecognizable, by the invisible *other*, the *spiritus*, who gives and takes away at the same time. As Derrida puts it:

L'« impouvoir » [...] n'est pas, on le sait, la simple impuissance, la stérilité du « rien à dire » ou le défaut d'inspiration. Au contraire, il est l'inspiration elle-même : force d'un vide, tourbillon du souffle d'un souffleur qui aspire vers lui et me dérobe cela même qu'il laisse venir à moi et que j'ai cru pouvoir dire *en mon nom*. La générosité de l'inspiration, l'irruption positive d'une parole dont je ne sais pas d'où elle vient, dont je sais [...] que je ne sais pas d'où elle vient et qui la parle, cette fécondité de *l'autre* souffle est l'impouvoir. [ED 263]

Indeed, the function of the “theater” in Artaud is neither aesthetic, nor dramatic, nor epistemological, as it invalidates all of these categories. Its function, more fundamental than life itself, is generative, and signals the originary event of a continual *(re-)birth*: « Il faut croire à un sens de la vie renouvelé par le théâtre [...]. Et tout ce qui n’est pas né peut encore naître pourvu que nous ne nous contentions pas de demeurer simples organes d’enregistrement » [TD 509].

***pneuma*: burnt signification**

In order to give a sense of the impact of this *primary* “theater” (prior to discourse, life, and any form of systematized knowledge), I would like to point briefly to a possible genealogy of the notion of “*la parole soufflée*” already present at the core of Judeo-Christian culture, through the categories of *pneuma* and *ruah*. The signification of the term in both Greek and Hebrew is typically divided between, on the one hand, an exhalation from the lung, a motion of air running through the body, and on the other hand, the “soul,” the “spirit,” the “holy,” an inspiration from a higher agency, God, or the *spiritus*. Reading Artaud, Derrida has noted that the notion of “inspiration,” defined as 1) the condition of life, of breathing and 2) the condition of the gift, of being *gifted* by a muse or a higher spirit, belongs to the structure of what he calls *la parole soufflée*: speech both *whispered* and *stolen* away by a higher agency. Accordingly, the religious practice of *pneumatology* throughout Judeo-Christian tradition equally relies on the notions of

speech, language, and signification originating from the (divine) Other, God himself. In response to this long-established practice, Artaudian “metaphysics,” as Derrida describes it, engages in the *repudiation* of the Other, God, who authorizes the Word, and thus endeavors to reach an utterly *idiosyncratic* and *autocratic* existence. In effect, it contends that God’s Word robs oneself from oneself, because it is precisely not one’s own, and one’s own language is quite literally *spirited away* by the *spiritus*.

Still operating within the conventional system of Judeo-Christian *pneumatology*, Artaud’s writing underscores another, *disruptive* aspect of the function of *pneuma* as integral to that system. While *pneuma* invokes the holy *spirit*, it equally invokes a non-spiritual category of *fire* which Aristotle had defined as the “vital heat,” or a so-called “connate *pneuma*.” Neither divine nor physiological, it is a “warm air” that Aristotle describes as “generative” of life, running through the body, unrelated to form or meaning, and responsible for the *procreation* of future generations, the *transmission* of souls from parents to offspring. It allows for a “mystical” re-birth without spiritual unity. In Aristotle’s terms, this “connate *pneuma*” is accordingly responsible for the *fertility* of the semen, yet does not restrain itself to the *sperma* alone. Significantly, the *pneuma*, via *physis*, is of a *fiery* essence, a *burning* substance that cannot be confined to the sole category of “fire,” as Aristotle puts it:

The semen contains within itself that which causes it to be fertile – what is known as ‘hot’ substance, which is not fire nor any similar substance, but the *pneuma* which is enclosed within the semen or foam-like stuff, and the natural substance which is in the *pneuma*; and this substance is analogous to the element which

belongs to the stars; and this is why fire does not generate animal... whereas the heat of the sun does effect generation, and so does the heat of animals.<sup>7</sup>

In *Artistotle's theory of material substance*, Gad Freudenthal stresses that the generative heat of *pneuma*, burning *like* fire but *without* being fire itself, is not a byproduct of the metaphysical *spiritus* [Freudenthal 108]. The theory of “connate *pneuma*,” while starting to separate itself from classical *pneumatology*, may also shed some light on Artaud’s obsessive preoccupation with (his) bodily fluids, particularly the sperm being *stolen* or *spirited away* by the higher agency of the State, or God (or, as he puts it in *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*, by American universities). Derrida notes accordingly that the etymological chain *ruah-pneuma-spiritus-Geist*, which constitutes one possible genealogy of “breath,” is traversed and displaced by Aristotle’s *non-spiritual* “solar fire.” This notion of *pneuma*, while being originary, generative, is equally *destructive*, i.e. burning and (ab)negating the Word of the *spiritus*.<sup>8</sup> This genealogy may serve us, throughout this entire study, as a backdrop to the *aporetic* mechanism of “souffle” or *pneuma*, both generative of life yet destructive of its essence.

---

<sup>7</sup> This excerpt from Aristotle is quoted in Gad Freudenthal, *Artistotle's theory of material substance*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.107 [Henceforth referred to as Freudenthal]. Freudenthal argues all along this study that for Aristotle the ‘connate *pneuma*’ does not belong to the material realm but to a more originary “heat” of *physis*, and is distinct from the category of the Forms, of *eidos*. Consequently *pneuma* as ‘vital heat’ operates, in similar ways than the *khora*, as a third term to the traditional dyad of *mimesis/eidos*.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *De l'Esprit, Heidegger et la question*. Paris : Galilée, 1987, n.1, p.163.



## Following Artaud

To articulate the scope of the structure of *la parole soufflée*, this study cannot restrict itself to analyzing one select field, be it literary, theatrical, theoretical, or biographical. Indeed, all of these categories will work together, and will be *worked through* by our labor to articulate “theatrical writing” in its primary function, while it demonstrates itself to be both generative and elusive of speech, discourse, systems of thought, and “life,” altogether. Following the principle that the notion of “theatrical writing” may not be easily formalized (insofar as it is itself the condition of impossibility of formalization), I will give separate readings of each of the following writers: Samuel Beckett, Bernard-Marie Koltès, Valère Novarina, and Jacques Derrida. These separate readings seek to define the origin of writing and the urgent *necessity* behind it, as the text becomes inarticulate, *singularly* for each writer. Non-coincidentally, during the process of their writing, all four engage explicitly with notions of “theatricality” (Koltès, Novarina) and “performativity” (Beckett, Derrida) in accordance, following Artaud, with the structure of *la parole soufflée*.

It is therefore equally impossible to do away entirely with formalization, running the risk of complete *unreadability* of “theatrical writing,” while *unreadability* denotes one of the formal conditions of this particular writing. The four authors I am concerned with resonate on a number of essential, even *primal* functions. While asking the question of the origin of writing – the general condition of enunciation being *inarticulate* – they all concur as to the irrepressible necessity of incessantly *re-inventing* the basic structure of language, its syntax, grammar, and in Novarina’s particular style, its lexicon. In fact, all

of them work very hard to reach a state of *unintelligibility*, as a way of opening up a different field of reading, or interplay, prior to linguistic transparency and discourse, and more reliant, as we shall see, on notions of “contamination” or “unconscious communication.” Throughout this study, the always-repeated *birth* of speech, coinciding structurally with the moment of the birth of the subject, escapes categorical definition, or predictable knowledge. That incessant movement of *re-birth*, pertaining to keep the subject in a invariable state of transformation, is called the “mother function,” as it is equally not arbitrary that these four authors are constantly in dialogue with their *actual* “mother figure.” “She” is present in their work both as an underlying function *and* a real biographical figure. The merging of the *real* mother with the *textual* “mother function” does not allow in any way a biographical reading of their work. On the contrary, it posits an unwavering principle of structural junction between the origins of *writing* and *life*. The urgent necessity of *inarticulate* writing – which for Artaud translates as *parole* or incantation – is resonant with the individual experience of the (often obsessive and destructive) relationship with the mother figure. In fact, I will demonstrate that the mother figure serves for each author as the Divine *spiritus* who robs them of their ability to articulate. As each author describes it, their writing is constantly put under erasure by what they commonly describe as « une langue maternelle incompréhensible. » Following Artaud, through generative acts of enunciation, they look in writing, on the stage, in their individual lives, and, for Derrida, in the theoretical space, for the *idiosyncrasy* of their own voices and existence, so that they may no longer be *spirited away*.

## Chapter 1

### **Samuel Beckett: The Unspeakable Law of Theatrical Writing**

The “mother” is both a predominant figure and function in Beckett’s writing. “She” shows to be at the very origin of his writing, not necessarily in the chronological sense, but structurally, within the boundaries of the text itself. I will demonstrate in this chapter that “her” textual function, in Beckett, subscribes to a double bind that allows for writing yet makes its inarticulate. As I will argue, this function is most conspicuous during the process that I will call Beckett’s “theatrical turn,” which will shape his writing through what Beckett himself calls his *aporetic inscriptions*. His writing is entirely driven by agency that triggers the birth of writing, but also forbids writing to account for anything other than its own inability to signify. Accordingly, I will also examine what I call the “theatricality” of Beckett’s writing as exceeding his dramatic work, with a particular focus on his later texts. This “theatricality” manifests itself, from very early on, most and foremost on the level of the syntax – one that no longer pertains to signifying structures, but instead enacts quite compulsively and continually the unspeakable instant of its own re-birth.

First, I will make a number of parallels between Beckett’s writing and his relationship with his *actual* mother, attempting to articulate the structure of what I will

call the “bio-text.” Following the event of Beckett’s so-called “revelation” of his own “folly” in response to his mother’s repudiation, I will secondly analyze the structure of her *aporetic* inscription within the text, exposing the mechanism of the textual “mother function.” Finally, I will define Beckett’s “theatrical turn” as the process of constantly shifting between languages, media, and genre, as a way of bearing witness and perpetuating, in writing, the mother’s last “dying breath.”

### **Savage Love: ‘Vagitus Uterinus’**

...jusqu'à n'y voir qu'une de ces histoires que  
 tu allais inventer pour contenir le vide  
 qu'encore une de ces vieilles fables pour pas  
 que vienne le vide t'ensevelir le suaire ...

Samuel Beckett - *Cette fois*

[... till just one of these things you kept  
 making up to keep the void out just another  
 of those old tales to keep the void from  
 pouring in on top of you the shroud...]

Samuel Beckett - *That Time*]

I will begin this study on Samuel Beckett by making a number of parallels between his work and his relation to his *real* mother. I do so without intending to subject the text to the authority of Beckett's biography, or expose May Beckett as the "real" source of Samuel's writing. Neither will I deem her personally responsible for what I will gradually expose as the "mother function" in Beckett's writing, that is, the "infirmity" or impossibility of communicative speech, which urges the author to tirelessly shift between languages, media, and textual forms, as triggered by the event of his notorious "revelation."

Rather than making a historical or biographical examination of Beckett's text, I intend to articulate a new economy between "writing" and "life," *bio* and *text*, prior to categorical separations, provided that, for Beckett particularly, writing belongs to what he will call a particular "zone of being" which operates *prior* to notions of "art" and "life." This analysis relies on a "bio-textual" dimension of Beckett's writing, rather than a "biographical" one, in attempting to establish the approach to "life" *as* "text." The general structure of this approach states that, in Beckett, the function of *writing* precedes the distinction between "fiction" and "truth," while relying on the "mother" according to the following logic: the birth of writing depends on 1) the *death* of the mother, 2) *taking the place* of the absent mother, and 3) generating, from that place, the "I" anew, in a movement of an incessant *re-birth*.

As I will demonstrate, the mother *precedes* and *over-determines* the general conditions of writing, and the impossibility of articulate speech and self-consciousness. The question of the origin of writing may be asked, in Beckett particularly, in the following way: How does one write in one's *own* voice? Which comes to the same

question as: How does one write the “mother,” *actually*? How is the “mother” writable? How does she simultaneously allow for and disrupts the process of writing the self, and of writing in general? Let us first engage this question starting with an excerpt from a “fiction,” *Molloy*, an early novel navigating around the figure of the *dead* mother, where Beckett examines the condition of possibility, or impossibility, for writing *literally* the word “mother”:

I called her Mag, when I had to call her something. And I called her Mag because for me, without my knowing why, the letter g abolished the syllable Ma, and as it were spat on it, better than any other letter would have done. And at the same time I satisfied a deep and doubtless unacknowledged need, the need to have a Ma, that is a mother, and to proclaim it, audibly. For before you say mag, you say ma, inevitably. And da, in my part of the world, means father. Besides for me the question did not arise, at the period I’m worming into now, I mean the question of whether to call her Ma, Mag or the Countess Caca, she having been for countless years deaf as a post.<sup>9</sup>

The trace of Beckett’s actual mother is immanent here, in that his mother’s given name was Marie, but she was mostly known by her nickname: May. We find here a “deep and doubtless unacknowledged” and yet articulated “need” to inscribe *negatively* the “real” mother into “fiction,” in finding a compromise between the *impossible* articulation of “May” and the mutilated, semi-articulation of her as “Mag.” Following a pattern that

---

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Molloy,” in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume II, Novels*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006 13 [henceforth referred to as Molloy].

will run throughout his entire work, Beckett associates “writing” to a series of secretions of bodily excesses, such as *spit* [*crachat*]. The *spit* inaugurates a long genealogy of bodily residues and circulation of air whose movement will describe the general condition for writing, such as the *belch* of the dying man, or excrements, non-coincidentally, reminiscent Artaud’s notorious depiction of language as *shitting*. Beckett’s inscription of the “mother” as “Mag” occurs ostensibly somewhere between, on the one hand, the (quasi-) articulated need for the actual mother figure (Ma), and on the other hand, echoing Artaud, the repudiation of her as the Countless Caca (‘Caca’ being French for Poop) i.e. *excrement*. Among other bodily secretions (as mentioned in the introduction, semen will become an important element, in relation to *pneuma*, the ‘breath’), *spitting* and *shitting* (out) the mother, i.e. *repudiating* her, serve paradoxically as a way of acknowledging or articulating the actual “mother.” The fecal attribute of the mother reveals to be at the same time a semi-admission of the need for the maternal figure, but only by ways of *repudiation* and (ab)negation.

One cannot take lightly Beckett’s remark about his dreadful writing-block described as “verbal constipation,” which accordingly may signal another semi-audible-acknowledgment of the presence of the “mother” in his actual writing, as a form of *repudiation*.<sup>10</sup> While Beckett seeks to repudiate his mother, in writing, all of Beckett’s biographers report that May Beckett had in turn consistently refused to acknowledge her son as a writer. In fact, she had chosen, in his place, a more conventional career for Samuel in the family business. She meticulously avoided reading her son’s work until she died, and Beckett admits that the “compromise” he had found with his mother in regard

---

<sup>10</sup> Deirdre BAIR, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1978, 94.

to his publications was simply to avoid mentioning them altogether.<sup>11</sup> Knowlson reports a noteworthy instance of May's violent reaction to Beckett's writing, early in the summer of 1930, resulting quite literally in him being ousted from the family home:

One day, while her son was out walking, May Beckett came across some of his writing that he had left on the table. She cast a casual eye on it, then started to read with a mixture of growing horror and disgust./ When Beckett returned to the house, he found his mother in a state of blind fury. A blazing row ensued in which she told him that she was appalled at what she had just read and that she would not have him writing such monstrosities under her roof. Nothing that Beckett could say would placate her. [Knowlson 131]

Beckett's father and his brother Frank's failure to confront May's fury also become a catalyzing factor to his repudiation from the mother's house. This strained relationship remained a recurring theme in Beckett's letters to his friend Thomas MacGreevy. There he describes his Mother's assimilation of him to his so-called "horrific" writing, which resulted in her repudiating her son altogether. But this repudiation, for Beckett, was admittedly nothing short of a proof of what he calls her "savage love" for him. I quote here extensively from a letter Beckett wrote to his friend on Oct. 6<sup>th</sup> 1937, from Cooldrinagh, Beckett's birthplace:

I have been sleeping here since Mother left. I do not know where she is or how long she will be away and Frank either has no definite news either or (sic.) instructions to keep it to himself. I have been going through my papers & trying to

---

<sup>11</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: Life of Samuel Beckett*, New York, A Touchston Book, 1996, 177 [henceforth referred to as Knowlson].



get my books into some kind of order. At first I had intended to move everything to neutral territory but have now the kind permission to lock my study door & give Frank the key. So I am saved a lot of trouble.

Instead of creeping about with the agenbite, as I suppose I ought, I am marveling at the pleasantness of Cooldrinagh without her. And I could not wish her anything better than to feel the same when I am away. But I don't wish her anything at all, neither good nor ill. *I am what her savage loving has made me*, and it is good that one of us should accept that finally. As it has been all this time, she wanting me to behave in a way agreeable to her in her October of analphabetic gentility, or to her friends ditto, or to the business code of father idealized – dehumanized – (“When ever in doubt of what [to] do, ask yourself what would darling Bill have done”) – the grotesque can go no further. It is like after a long afternoon of the thumb screws – being commanded by the bourreau to play his favorite song without words with feeling. I simply don't want to see her or write to her or hear from her. And as for the peace in the heart and all the other milk puddings that the sun is said to set on so much better, they will never be there anyway, least of all as the fruit of formal reconciliation. There are the grey hairs that will go down in sorrow, that want to go down in sorrow, as they came up in sorrow, because they are that kind. And if a telegram came now to say she was dead, I would not do the Furies the favour of regarding myself even as indirectly responsible.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1, 1929–1940*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld & Lois More Overbeck, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2009, 552-533, my emphasis [henceforth *Letters of Samuel Beckett*].

The inference that his existence is the product of the mother's "savage love" indicates, for Beckett, a passive acceptance of May's assimilation of him to his writing. In effect, this repudiation of Beckett, as both the son *and* the writer, becomes a precondition to his entire practice of writing. In effect, his writing may exist only on the condition of the mother's absence, or, as he puts it himself, the possibility of her *death*. As the above letter suggests, this precondition for the continued existence of his work must exclude, *structurally*, any prospect of "reconciliation." His urge to complain, however, about his relationship with his mother becomes a way of semi-recognizing May's sway over his writing, *in absentia*, and the debt that his work – most importantly his "theatrical turn" – will owe to her repudiation. If Beckett's confessed desire is to disregard May's existence entirely for the sake of his literary work, his yearning for *erasing her figure* will shape all the more the trajectory of his work as circling obsessively around the unspeakable notion of the origin of writing.

The repudiation or *death* of the mother will then signal a desire for re-birth, but one *in writing* and *through writing*, as the text takes the place of the mother, thus supplementing her absence, and finally giving birth, anew, to *I*. Beckett accordingly starts *Molloy* by stating: "I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there" [Molloy 3]. The "fictional" character enunciates, in the very first lines of *Molloy*, this originary transaction between birth, death and writing. The *I* has begun writing *in the place* of the mother, who is dead. In that place, the *I*'s only justification for being (there) is the production of *new* texts, new pages, regularly handed to an unidentified man who collects them, corrects them, and also pays for them. "When he

comes for the fresh pages he brings back the previous week's. They are marked with signs I don't understand. [...] I don't work for money. For what then? I don't know. The truth is I don't know much. For example my mother's death. Was she dead when I came?" [Molloy 3]. The impossibility to affix a date to the death of the mother (not coincidentally reminiscent of Camus's opening line in *l'Etranger*)<sup>13</sup> establishes the event as occurring *prior* to the manuscript, not merely chronologically, but structurally: the event of her death may not be writable insofar as it inaugurates the very possibility of writing. This transaction between birth, death and writing, therefore sets the rule for a new economy between the mother and the *I*, via the text. The birth of the *I* equates with a birth of *writing* in place of the mother, after her *death*, that is, also as a *debt to her*. Given the sway of the mother over the text in the form of a radical absence, the *affirmation* of the textual *I* serves at the same time as a form of *identification* with the mother, *via negativa*.<sup>14</sup> This transaction establishes a new bio-textual economy where the mother

---

<sup>13</sup> In a letter to George Reavey in the end of 1946, Beckett writes: "I have finished my French story, about 45000 words I think. The first half is appearing in the July *Temps modernes* (Sartre's canard)... I hope to have the complete story published as a separate work. Camus's *Etranger* is not any longer. Try to read it, I think it's important" [Knowlson 324]. The importance of Camus's novel in relation to Beckett cannot be reduced to one particular element. Let us simply remember the opening lines of *L'Etranger*, which Beckett mentions only a few months before writing *Molloy*: "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J'ai reçu un télégramme de l'asile: 'Mère décédée. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués.' Cela ne veut rien dire. C'était peut-être hier," Albert Camus, *l'Etranger*, Paris, Gallimard, 1942 9. ["Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: 'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything. It may have happened yesterday."]

<sup>14</sup> All the more relevant to our elaboration of "the mother function" is indeed her sway over the text by virtue of her absence, her death, that is, by *negation*. One of the original essays permitting the elaboration of 'foreclosure' is Freud's short article on *Negation*, where the first clinical instance concerns, not incidentally, the "mother": "[...] We realize that this is a repudiation, by projection, of an idea that has just come up. Or: 'You ask who this person in the dream can be. It's not my mother.' We emend this to: 'So it is his

erases herself, as the *I* takes her place and, consequently, perceives “myself,” understands “myself,” and writes “myself” while continuously giving birth anew to “*myself*.” The textual *I* becomes in fact *auto-generative*, very much echoing the Artaudian idiom: “Moi, Antonin Artaud, je suis mon fils, mon père, ma mère et moi.”<sup>15</sup> Let us go back to the first page of *Molloy*:<sup>16</sup>

In any case I have her room. I sleep in her bed. I piss and shit in her pot. I have taken her place. *I must resemble her more and more. All I need now is a son.*

Perhaps I have one somewhere. But I think not. *He would be old now, nearly as old as myself.* It was a little chambermaid, It wasn't true love. The true love was in another. We'll come to that. Her name? I have forgotten it again. It seems to me sometimes that I even knew my son, that I helped him. Then I tell myself it's impossible I could ever have helped anyone. I have forgotten how to spell too, and half the words. That doesn't matter apparently. Good. [Molloy 3-4, my emphases]

---

mother.’ In our interpretation, we take the liberty of disregarding the negation and of picking out the subject-matter alone of the association. It is as though the patient had said: ‘It's true that my mother came into my mind as I thought of this person, but I don't feel inclined to let the association count.’ Sigmund, Freud, *Negation*, Standard Edition Vol XIX 235. In accordance to Freud's logic, the foreclosed object will always already partake of the “mother,” given that the negation of the object is, as a process, generative, inaugural and originary, *via negativa*, subscribing therefore to the process of the “mother function.”

<sup>15</sup> Antonin Artaud, “Ci-gît,” Tome XII, in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, NRF Gallimard, 1989, 77. [“I, Antonin Artaud, am my son / my father, my mother / and myself”].

<sup>16</sup> Is it relevant to note, as Beckett's most trusted biographer reports, the following ‘historical’ fact: “It was here that he wrote the greater part of his next novel, *Molloy*, which he had begun on May 2, literally in ‘[his] mother's room’ at New Place in Foxrock, although the very beginning of the novel seems to have been written last” [Knowlson 332]. It is also noteworthy that this apartment in Foxrock was newly acquired by May and was therefore exclusively hers, and was *not* Beckett's childhood home.

The identification between the *I* and the mother, along with the originary split causing the re-birth of the *I* by itself, occur on a double condition: 1) the radical absence/death of the mother figure, and 2) the mother's declared inability to care for the *I* in the first place, the same way the *I* declares itself now incapable of helping (or *fathering*) anyone at all. This identification effectively transfers the mother's infirmity onto the *I*. The *self-generative I* becomes by this same movement *degenerative*. Molloy's "I have forgotten how to spell too, and half the words" also participates in this degenerative movement, reiterating, in clear words, a gesture earlier performed in *Watt* (1943) of an uncompromisingly *inarticulate* language. This double movement of *generative* and *degenerative* speech will become accentuated by the time of Beckett's later short pieces for theater and prose. One can accordingly find in this degenerative writing a "confession," as in *Watt*, of the *I* declaring to have "never been born properly,"<sup>17</sup> which already echoes the later motif of Beckett's "dramaticules" where his characters repeatedly "confess," in the third person singular: "birth was the death of him."<sup>18</sup>

It becomes therefore increasingly apparent that Beckett's characterization of his unbearable "writer's block" as "verbal constipation" may in fact signal an incapacity to *evacuate* the Countess Caca, the mother who has been internalized by (and identified with) the *I*, *via negativa*. In this view, Beckett has put himself *in the place* of the mother, by (un-)knowingly drawing a parallel between "constipation" and "pregnancy."

---

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Beckett, "Watt," in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume I, Novels*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006, 374.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Beckett, "A Piece of Monologue," in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume III, Dramatic Works*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006, 453.

The junction which I describe here between the two conventionally *opposite* logics of “text” and “life,” which I have begun to call “bio-text,” echoes in fact a call made by Derrida in his own reading of Artaud. While examining Artaud’s own interest in *fecality* as a textual function (*La Recherche de la fécalité*), Derrida feels obliged to add discreetly in a footnote that Artaud *actually* died of a cancer of the rectum.<sup>19</sup> But he also feels the need to justify this rare reference to a biographical “fact” in the following way:

Nous nous sommes délibérément abstenu, cela va de soi, de tout ce qu’on appelle « référence biographique ». Si nous rappelons en ce lieu précis qu’Artaud est mort d’un cancer du rectum, ce n’est pas pour que l’exception confirme la bonne règle, mais parce que nous pensons que le statut (à trouver) de cette remarque et d’autres semblables, ne doit pas être celui de la dite « référence biographique ». Le nouveau statut – à trouver – est celui des rapports entre l’existence et le texte, entre ces deux formes de textualité et l’écriture générale dans le jeu de laquelle elles s’articulent.

[ED n.1 271]

Derrida’s remark on Artaud’s cancer of the rectum hints to the possibility of an economy between “text” and “life” different from biographical reading. The relevance of this note for our analysis is not merely that Beckett was himself obsessed with the *fecal* function of writing, while he also suffered “coincidentally” from what he referred to as a chronic illness of the “anus”: a 10 year long “pruritis” of which he almost never spoke to

---

<sup>19</sup> The significance of Derrida’s note relies of course on Artaud’s continuous insistence, throughout his life and work, on the assimilation of ‘language’ and ‘signification’ to *feces*, a motif that will become also important for our reading throughout all of the chapters, but analyzed in more details in Chapter 4 on the relation between Artaud and Novarina.

anyone.<sup>20</sup> Drawing a parallel between Artaud and Beckett's rectal illnesses exceeds either biographical coincidence or literary motifs. It draws a junction between "text" and "life" confined neither within the category of "biography" nor of "literature," but a practice of "writing" whose logic or structure can hardly be dissociated from that of "living."

It should also come as no surprise now that Beckett's life-changing "revelation," a so-called "mystical experience" that revealed to be pivotal to his entire work, took place, in 1945, in no other place than his *mother's room* [Knowlson 319].<sup>21</sup> The "revelation" is formally known as "a new beginning" in his work and his realization that the "folly" or "darkness" that had crippled him during his life was neither therapeutically curable, nor could it be denied, rejected, or expelled from either his life or writing. Returning after the war to Dublin and to his mother's newly acquired apartment, Beckett is stricken, in her room, by a "vision" which he famously refers to in *Krapp's Last Tape*, admittedly in a more "romanticized" rendition of the actual event.<sup>22</sup> In the 1958 play, the event is

---

<sup>20</sup> We may nevertheless find a trace of this illness in a letter to his friend McGreevy: "The anus is better, it was really awful for fully 10 years in Berlin – consternating. It was on the mend as I left Berlin, or rather I left Berlin as soon as it was on the mend, and now it has more or less settled down, though it is only a question of how often and how badly it will light up again before I finish this journey and get home & have it cleared up. The damm (sic.) old pruritis is just about as bad as ever, no doubt part of the same thing. But I am used to it. Otherwise I am as well as I ever am." Beckett, Letter to McGreevy, 16 February 1937, 447.

<sup>21</sup> It is also noteworthy that the concerned room did not belong to Beckett's childhood home in Cooldrinagh, since May had moved by then to a smaller apartment. In other terms, the metonymic proximity with the place and time of the revelation was that of the mother *alone*.

<sup>22</sup> Beckett confides in a 1987 interview with Knowlson: "Krapp's vision was on the pier at Dún Laoghaire; mine was in my mother's room. Make that clear once and for all," [Knowlson 319]. Beckett writes in 1986 to Richard Ellmann: "all the jetty and howling wind are imaginary. It happened to me, summer 1945, in my mother's little house, named New Place, across the road from Cooldrinagh." [Knowlson, n.55 686].

revealed by a *tape recorder*<sup>23</sup> bringing back the voice of the character, Krapp, from twenty years earlier. I quote here the now famous excerpt; let us note for our purposes that the following (so-called “extensive”) description of Beckett’s vision fails to *name* effectively what *it*, the event, actually was:

Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indulgence until that memorable night in March at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision, at last. This fancy is what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that . . .  
(*hesitates*) . . . for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely – (*Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again*) [...] clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality – (*Krapp curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)<sup>24</sup>

This “vision, at last,” Beckett elsewhere alludes to it as the moment when, while beginning to write *Molloy*, “I became aware of my own folly” [Knowlson 319]. As described here, the condition of the event of the “vision,” i.e. “the fire that set it alight,” while becoming suddenly recognizable and “iterable” (in the third person singular,

---

<sup>23</sup> The motif of *recording devices* will become, as we will see at the end of the next section, a consistent means of recalling the dead mother, and a sign of *theatricality* prior to the theatrical medium alone.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Krapp’s Last Tape,” in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume III, Dramatic Works*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006 226.



insofar as Krapp acts as a doppelganger for Beckett himself), is nevertheless left *unsaid* and *unidentifiable*. In 1987, 42 years after the “revelation” and 29 years after *Krapp*, Beckett suggests a possible ending to one of the crucial open-ended sentences from the play, in a note to the editor of *Krapp*’s theatrical notebook: “[the dark I have always struggled to keep under is] in reality my most –’ Lost: ‘my most precious ally’ etc. meaning his true element at last and key to the opus magnum” [Knowlson 319]. What Beckett seems to suggest is that Krapp, a drunken, decrepit writer overcome by failure by the end of his life, had admittedly realized, twenty years earlier, not merely that his “opus magnum” is doomed to failure, but that failure (both literarily and existentially) was, without any concession, the “opus magnum” itself.

The notion of failure is closely related to the motif of *impotence* – similar to what Derrida notes as Antonin Artaud’s *impouvoir/unpower* – and plays a central role in Beckett’s “vision.” “Impotence,” a state of being that is left *incapacitated* yet still somehow *active*, will become the condition of what we will shortly call the *aporetic* injunction of Beckett’s writing (“I can’t go on, you must go on, I’ll go on,” [The Unnamable 407]): it defines the most celebrated and paraphrased Beckettian axiom, taken from the first page of the 1983 piece of prose, *Worstward Ho*: “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tired. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”<sup>25</sup> This injunction (“fail again, fail better”) clearly comments on the *ethical* and the *esthetic* dimension of Beckett’s work following his so-called “revelation,” as a direct result of his “vision” in his mother’s room. Commenting on that event, Beckett is quoted as saying: “I realized that my own way was impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away,

---

in subtracting rather than adding” [Knowlson 319]. In juxtaposing the *pre*-revelation and the *post*-revelation periods in Beckett’s work, one is struck by a first major transformation (among many, including the “theatrical turn” that will be discussed soon): his texts begin to *gradual shrink*, starting from the quite extensive “Trilogy,” which includes the monumental *Unnamable*, toward the new genres of extremely short pieces of text and “dramaticules,” such as the most minimalist 30 second textless play called *Breath*.

But there is one more fundamental dimension of this “revelation” which in fact precedes and overshadows any *ethical* and *aesthetical* dimension in his work. According to Beckett’s own understanding of his experience, the call for “failing better,” for impotence, situates the text and his writing prior to both artistic achievement and ethical discourse. In fact, following his “revelation,” Beckett detaches himself once and for all from what he considered to be the practice of *literature*, which before then constituted his primary ambition, and was highly influenced by the work of his literary mentor and personal friend, James Joyce. By Abandoning this “literary” pretensions, thus detaching himself from Joyce, Beckett develops an entirely new relationship with writing. Interview from October 27, 1989, with Knowlson:

The more Joyce knew the more he could. He is tending towards omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I’m working with impotence, ignorance. There seems to be a kind of esthetic axiom that expression is achievement – must be an achievement. *My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always*

*been set aside by artists as something unusable – something by definition incompatible with art.* [Knowlson, n. 57, 686, my emphasis]

In response to Joyce and the “potency” constitutive of “literature,” Beckett considers his writing to belong to a “zone of being” that is “incompatible with art.” He accordingly places once and for all writing as a practice prior to any esthetic or ethical discourse.<sup>26</sup> It recalls his notorious and laconic response, late in his life, to the newspaper *Libération* which had asked, alongside a number of other writers, the reason why he writes. Beckett’s answer was limited to the following: “bon qu’à ça” [*only good for this*]. To put it succinctly, Beckettian writing makes the distinction between “being” and “art” obsolete, insofar as Beckett’s enterprise of “failing better,” i.e embracing impotence and ignorance, goes against the acceptance of neither of the two categories. Rather, the summer of 1945 saw Beckett pressed to the point of accepting at last a pre-existing state of impotency, whose *passivity* describes the condition of being *actively* acted upon by an agency that escapes knowledge and control, that is, for Beckett, the agency of the(M)other.

The pivotal moment of his “revelation” was in fact long time coming. Almost ten years earlier, Beckett had come to the tragic conclusion of finding himself “incurable”

---

<sup>26</sup> The impossibility for the *text* to be made “art,” “fiction,” or “literature,” rather subscribing to the structure of “life” and “being,” becomes a consistent thread of the post-revelation works, exemplified here in the *Texts for Nothing # 4*: “There's my life, why not, it is one, if you like, if you must, I don't say no, this evening. There has to be one, it seems, once there is speech, no need of a story, a story is not compulsory, just a life, that's the mistake I made, one of the mistakes, to have wanted a story for myself, whereas life alone is enough.” Samuel Beckett, “Texts for Nothing,” in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume IV, Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006, 307.

from long years of depression, apathy, and psychosomatic symptoms. After almost two years of psychotherapy with Wilfred Bion, Beckett wrote to his friend about his resignation regarding the prospect of being “cured” of his “folly.” Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, on January 16<sup>th</sup> 1936:

Bion in his last acknowledgment of the filthy “trusted I had by now taken up my work with pleasure and satisfaction,” as he was sure I must “even though not entirely freed from neurosis”! Mother’s whole idea of course is to get me committed to life here. And my travel-courage is so gone that the collapse is more than likely. I find myself more than ever frightened by the prospect of effort, initiative & even the little self-assertion of getting about from one place to another. Solitude here, perhaps more sober than before, seems the upshot of the London Torture. Indeed I do not see what difference the analysis has made. Relations with M. as thorny as ever. A heart attack last night that would have done credit to three years ago. The only plane on which I feel my defeat not proven is literary. Warte nur... [*Just wait...*] [...]

[...] Perhaps the flight will be sooner than expected, but no more Bion. As I write, think, move, speak, praise & blame, I see myself living up to the specimen that these two years have taught me I am. The word is not out before I am blushing for my automatism.” [Letters of Samuel Beckett, 299-300]

Let us note right away that it was no one else than Beckett himself who requested a year earlier, in 1934, that his mother literally *pays* for his therapy with Bion. Aside

from the fact that Beckett was broke at that time – he had abandoned his position at Trinity College to dedicate himself to writing, though mainly because of his loathing for teaching –, it is also obvious that his state of impotence (his fright at the “prospect of effort, initiative,” along with his recurring “heart attacks”) was not unrelated to his “thorny” relationship with May.

To say, however, that the mother is at the origin of Beckett’s “folly” all through his life, and that by the summer of 1945 he had come to terms with this notion, is in fact not to say much. It is more relevant to note that, both historically and textually, Beckett is driven to supplement the absence of the mother figure *in writing*, as we have established, to the point of mothering himself, of becoming at once self-generative and degenerative *in writing*. The main goal then for the text becomes letting the (M)other “come out” in ways that are unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unrecognizable. Her *elliptical* inscription contradicts any notion of successful repudiation or separation between the (M)other and the self. Following the so-called revelation, Beckett has demonstrated that writing requires letting the (M)other speak, letting it/him/her write, and give birth again, anew, to the (textual) *I*. But as a result, this writing, this text, this speech, will exceed the categories of knowledge and communication in the accepted definitions of these terms. By the time of Beckett’s “revelation,” he appears to have reached a different type of knowledge, that is, the necessity of un-knowing, of powerlessness, and of accepting the strings attached on him by the agency of the other, by the law of the Mother. The authority of this law, which in his 1937 letter Beckett calls the shameful “automatism,” becomes by 1945 his most precious “ally.” By that time, he has *actively* chosen to

welcome at last a predominant state of *passivity*, which he had until then struggled to “cure.”

Knowlson, his authorized biographer, suggests yet another outcome of Beckett’s “revelation” as being the shift of focus of his work from *exterior* reality to “his own *inner* world” [Knowlson 319]. To follow up on Knowlson’s argument that only after 1945 Beckett began to use the first pronoun *I*, one might also note that Beckett’s *imaginary field* gradually shifted after that time to describe quite literally - and obsessively - the interiors of closed *womb-like spaces*, containing solitary, infinitely motionless (and often elderly) bodies, curved in fetal positions. It is beyond the scope of this study (and reasonably of any *readable* study) to make an exhaustive list of those womb-like spaces in Beckett’s work, from the interior of trash cans to ditches, from wide and deserted dark spaces to extremely small and blindingly white spaces, from underground ruins to vacant empty rooms,<sup>27</sup> from closed circles to quads: “Five foot square, six high, no way in, none out.”<sup>28</sup> Essentially, these spaces function as closed containers of human bodies, i.e. a *khora*. The late pieces of prose become increasingly explicit in their description, as in *Ping* for instance: “All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn. Light heat white floor one square yard never seen. White walls one yard by two

---

<sup>27</sup> *That Time*: “... when was that was your mother ah for God’s sake all gone long ago that time you went back that last time to look was the ruin still there where you hid as a child someone’s folly.” [Vol III *That Time* 418]; “...quand c’était est-ce que ta mère ah tais-toi tous liquidés belle lurette cette fois où tu es retourné cette dernière fois voir si elle était là toujours la ruine où enfant tu te cachais la ruine d’une folie la Folie comment qu’elle s’appelait » [Cette fois 11].

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Beckett, “All Strange Away,” in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume IV, Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006, 349.

white ceiling one square yard never seen. Bare white body fixed only the eyes only just.”<sup>29</sup>

It should therefore come as neither surprising nor arbitrary that by the time of his death, at 82 years old, in an interview with Knowlson on Nov. 12 1989, Beckett confides that all through his adult life he had had vivid *intrauterine* memories: “I certainly came up with some extraordinary memories of being in the womb. Intrauterine memories. I remember feeling trapped, of being imprisoned and unable to escape, of crying to be let out but no one would hear, no one was listening. I remember being in pain but being unable to do anything about it. I used to go back to my digs and write notes on what had happened, on what I'd come up with.” [Knowlson 171].

We may conclude this section by noting that, for Beckett, writing had in some ways already begun *before* the beginning, from within the womb, *prior* to his birth, while being *in (the place of)* the mother. In effect, writing had begun already from the womb in the form of a *vagitus uterinus*, extending itself out of the womb in a form that became a prevalent theme in Beckett's work: the gasp of the newborn's first *breath*.

### **Beckett's Aporetic Inscriptions: the Call for “Theatricality”**

... *it's the beginning of my life present formulation...*

*How it is*, Vol IV 412

---

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Ping,” in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume IV, Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006, 371. Among many others, see *Texts for Nothing, Imagination Dead Imagine, All Strange Away, Ping, Company, Worstward Ho*.

Following the rule that the “mother’s” inscription in the text is both *originary* and *inarticulate*, the strongest instance of Beckett’s elaboration of “her” textual function must therefore occur where the word “mother” is itself predominantly *absent*. “Her” inscription is accordingly most powerfully at work in *the Unnamable*. The very first page of *the Unnamable*, notorious in that respect, may be one of the strongest instances of a text accounting for the impossibility of its beginning. Beckett’s first line addresses right away the question of (textual) origin and origination, but only to underline the impossibility of answering it, thus ascribing from the start the laws of writing to those of questions *without* answers: “Où maintenant? Quand maintenant? Qui maintenant? Sans me le demander. Dire je. Sans le penser.”<sup>30</sup> These unanswerable questions open the text, while acknowledging, in plain terms, the impossibility of speaking of the origin of writing in other forms than by “aporia”:

J’ai l’air de parler, ce n’est pas moi, de moi, ce n’est pas de moi. Ces quelques généralisations pour commencer. Comment faire, comment vais-je faire, que dois-je faire, dans la situation où je suis, comment procéder ? Par pure aporie ou bien par affirmation ou négations infirmées au fur et à mesure, ou tôt ou tard. Cela d’une façon générale. Il doit y avoir d’autres biais. Sinon, ce serait à désespérer de tout. Mais c’est à désespérer de tout. A remarquer, avant d’aller plus loin, de l’avant, que *je dis aporie sans savoir ce que ça veut dire*. [Inn 8, my emphasis]

---

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Beckett, *L’Innommable*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1953, 7. [Henceforth referred to as Inn.].



Beckett answers the question of writing, of “how to proceed,” in the form of a question: “by *aporia* pure and simple?” At first, the question counters itself by allowing a second question, which in turn should allow for an answer according to *discursive* rules: by “affirmations” and by “negations,” by agreement and by exclusion. However, while asking the question of the origin of writing, a blunt reality forces itself upon the question, indicating once and for all the impossibility of the answer in any possible form, discursively or logically, or in the form of acquired knowledge. It demonstrates not only a lack of knowledge, but its *impossibility* in respect to the origin of writing: “I should mention before going any further, any further on, that *I say aporia without knowing what it means.*”

What does this *aporetic* treatment of the use of the word “*aporia*” demonstrate? First, it suggests that by the very *act* of naming itself “*aporetic*,” the text signals a structural paradox: the *act* of naming seemingly erases the *meaning* of the word “*aporia*” which thus then becomes incomprehensible. The reader who may be aware of the meaning of “*aporia*” – and may very well search for it in a dictionary – observes that the text in fact uses this word quite *accurately*, but *unknowingly*. The “enactment” of the word – its naming – seems to exceed the content of its name, its meaning, its presence. Accordingly, the text’s investigation of its own origin becomes, in this case, a double confession: 1) it acknowledges the origin of writing as escaping any possibility of knowledge or unequivocal inscription; 2) by virtue of being accurately yet unknowingly articulated as “*aporia*,” that originary function becomes incomprehensible (to the text itself), exceeding its own inscription, and becomes paradoxically *unnamable* by the very act of being named.

How can this paradoxical agency allow for the accurate word, yet deem it insufficient, incomprehensible, empty, in a place where it not only signifies properly, but also presents itself as the origin of writing?

A second implication of Beckett's question consists in the enunciation of the word *acting* in ways that not only render signification impossible, but also turn it into a performance, a "theatrical" supplement to its signifying limitations. By enacting the given meaning of the word, while demonstrating the condition of impossibility of meaning, of origin, of self-knowledge, the word instantly *negates* its own intelligibility, thus establishing the *act* of naming as a more primary agency compared to the name itself. The act of naming establishes itself as the unnamable remainder [*reste*] of the name.

Most importantly, this aporetic *act* of naming shows itself to be self-generative. To the extent that the origin of writing is admittedly inarticulate, Beckett's paradoxical declaration also establishes the origin of writing as a *byproduct* of writing itself, insofar as the *act* of enunciation (naming) inaugurates the birth of an unnamable remainder [*reste*]. Derrida associates this self-generative function with the "mother," but also with a "lack" inherent to the name itself, the name of the "mother," or *khora*: "*Khora* reaches us, and as the name. *And when a name comes, it immediately says more than the name: the other of the name and quite simply the other*, whose irruption the name announces." [On the Name 89, my emphasis].<sup>31</sup> The "mother function" infiltrates an irreducible difference between the act and its inscription, a *shift* engendered by the unnamable remainder,

---

<sup>31</sup> "It is a matrix, womb, or receptacle that is never and nowhere offered up in the form of presence, or in the presence of form, since both of these already presuppose an inscription within the mother." [Dissemination 160]

which always escapes inscription, and therefore calls writing to perpetuate itself “theatrically” rather than discursively. The *structural necessity* defining writing as action rather than inscription will become the driving law of Beckett’s writing. In fact, the remaining of his entire work is driven by obsessive and constant instances of *shifting*, from prose to theater and to numerous other media. As I will demonstrate, the genuine “theatricality” in Beckett lies in his compulsive leaps from one medium to the next, and is not simply confined to writings of the theatrical genre: “There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless.”

The textual enactment, at the moment when writing reaches the limits of articulation, establishes in Beckett an insatiable *desire* to return to the impossible origin, and therefore to seek the unnamable agency which causes an incessant vacillation between *discursive speech* and *absolute silence*. This space in-between, as we will shortly see, defines itself as the place of continual (re-)birth of speech (though never communicating, never signifying), carried on through such originary notions as “breath” and “whispers.”

The in-between [*l’entre*] of speech and silence unveils itself as the function of the womb [*l’antré*]. This “fetal” state in Beckett describes a space where silence never overcomes speech, or vice versa. The *aporetic* economy of the textual womb follows the law of a double bind:

*On the one hand*, one finds in Beckett a similar dichotomy to Artaud’s “metaphysics of the Flesh”: the idiosyncrasy of a non-signifying Flesh being opposed to systems of signification. In Artaud those systems always originate from external agencies, such as the civil or divine laws (i.e. the *spiritus*). As the following excerpt

demonstrates, there is also a structural dichotomy in Beckett, which operates between 1) a *blissful* state of *comatose* silence – one he revealingly calls elsewhere “the lush plush of the womby-tomby”<sup>32</sup> – deprived of laws, language, and knowledge, and 2) all the latter systems of representation imposed by *external* agencies who remain unidentified: i.e. by the *others*, by *them*.<sup>33</sup> The following excerpt from *the Unnamable* demonstrates in explicit terms such a metaphysical dichotomy:

They have told me, explained to me, described to me, what it all is, what it looks like, what it's all for, one after the other, thousands of times, in thousands of connections, until I must have begun to look as if I understood. Who would ever think, to hear me, that I've never seen anything, never heard anything but their voices? And man, the lectures they gave me on men, before they even began trying to assimilate me to him! What I speak of, what I speak with, all comes from them [...]. Dear incomprehension, it's thanks to you I'll be myself, in the end. Nothing will remain of all the lies they have glutted in me with. And I'll be myself at last, as a starveling belches his odorless wind [*des rots retentissants et inodores de*

---

<sup>32</sup> “Echo’s Bones”, typescript B389/122, Beckett Collection at the Baker Library, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, 7.

<sup>33</sup> The originary split between the *I* and the other, which we call here *foreclosure*, becomes a thread to our reading of Beckett, indicating a coherent pattern toward our final analysis of *Not I*, where of course the *third person singular* dominates the whole play. Without diving in the psychoanalytic explanation of *foreclosure* (which would be rich and yet too long for the space accorded in this footnote), I would like to refer briefly to Jean-François Lyotard’s articulation of the phenomenon resulting into a pronominal split, as when discursive language tries (and fails) to articulate the inarticulate affect: “Le discours peut et doit tout essayer de dire. – Mais alors, il parle de l’affect à la troisième personne. L’affect est comme la mort et comme la naissance : s’il est pensé, articulé, raconté, il est celui de l’autre, des autres » [« Voix », in *Lectures d’enfance*, Paris : Gallilée : 1991, 137]. Acting under both the necessity and the impossibility to bearing witness to the affect (i.e. the comatose state of the pre-lingual subject), speech is foreclosed from the *I* and originates, therefore, from the exterior, from the third person.

*famélique*], before the bliss of coma [*s'achevant dans le coma, un long coma délicieux*]. But who, they? Is it really worth while inquiring? [Vol II p.318].<sup>34</sup>

What I call here temporarily, following Artaud's denomination, a "Beckettian metaphysics," relies seemingly on a "bipolar" structure, depicting notions of "knowledge," "language," and "truth" to belong structurally to the category of *lies*. They are described as systems forced upon the subject by exterior (unidentified) agencies, and from a community of people conspiring against the (speaking) subject in order to force him precisely to speak. This denunciation of language (speech and writing), but by no other means than language itself, describes what Derrida defines in Artaud as the paradoxical "metaphysics" of "stolen speech," or the "spirited-away speech," *la parole soufflée*. Beckett's *pre*-lingual subject *I*, repeatedly yearning to return to a comatose state (which state is seemingly posited as "truth" *via negativa*) is *given* knowledge of itself by the others. And yet, it also paradoxically *knows* that this given knowledge, and any knowledge as such, is apocryphal.

Following the structure of *la parole soufflée*, the *other* functions as the prompter, a *spiritus*, who breathes/whispers in/to the subject his speech, his knowledge and consciousness of himself: "Who would ever think, to hear me, that I've never seen anything, never heard anything but their voices?" Following Derrida's thread on Artaud, we see now that the distinction between the external voices and the comatose state no longer operates on the level of an oppositional or "metaphysical" dyad. The state of coma

---

<sup>34</sup> « Chère incompréhension, c'est à toi que je devrai d'être moi, à la fin. Il ne restera bientôt plu rien de leurs bourrages. C'est moi alors que je vomirai enfin, dans des rots retentissants et inodores de famélique, s'achevant dans le coma, un long coma délicieux » [Inn. 63].

(of *impouvoir*) becomes in fact a pre-condition to the reception of speech from the others. As it is going to become clear in a moment, for Beckett, the fetal state, far from being blissful, is always already haunted by the (M)other's voice.

For, *on the other hand*, a difference should be stated between Beckett and Artaud, insofar as the above described metaphysical dichotomy does not force Beckett to give up on language and signification altogether, as Artaud was inclined to do in favor of his notorious, wordless, and un-signifying Cry. Despite the avowed desire to recede back to a "comatose" state deprived of language, speech and meaning, Beckett's own singular approach may be reduced to a particular injunction forbidding him from falling *completely* outside of language. Not incidentally, this injunction ends *the Unnamable* much in the same way the text had begun: without closure, purpose, or end (*telos*), i.e., by *aporia*:

*I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as they are any, until they find me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, 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, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.*

[Vol II 407, my emphasis]

The *aporetic* injunction ending *the Unnamable* does not posit, as in Artaud's Cry, a return to an authentic *speechless* state as being. On the contrary, it underlines a necessity,

a call for the text *not* to end despite its impossibility to signify. This impossibility motivates Beckett's text from beginning to end, i.e. not to give up on words.

The text therefore auto-generates itself from the injunction to achieve and the necessity to accomplish the *impossible*: "I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on." One finds here, and in all of Beckett's work, a relentless call for *answerability*, for *responsibility before the impossible*. It partakes in the double bind requiring *common* language to become accountable for the *I* diminished to its *idiosyncratic, unspeakable* origin: "... it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am..." We may therefore stress that Beckett's call *never* to stop speaking (i.e. never to fall in complete silence, where the *I* is) also depicts the blissful state of "comatose" as nothing but a fantasy, neither more desirable nor any truer than the systems of language or knowledge imposed by the exterior *other*. In effect, the "comatose" state of the womb is always already inhabited by the voice of the *other*, never truly blissful nor silent.

This irreducible polyphony, already resonant in the womb-like state of the pre-lingual *I*, becomes manifest in the text in the form of a cleavage of the pronoun *I*, as seen in the above quotation.<sup>35</sup> This cleavage, along with the omnipresence of solitary and paralytic characters in Beckett, and his declared propensity to idiosyncratic and

---

<sup>35</sup> This results in a cleavage that constitutes the backbone of Beckett's writing, one that is manifest in the above passage in the pronominal form, a polyphony of voices that determines the modality of the pronoun *I*. This *schize* testifies to two very opposite and incompatible agencies behind a text that claims to operate in the first person singular, yet in the mode of a dialogue between the self and the other (self): "*I* can't go on, *you* must go on, *I*'ll go on." The monologist nature of this writing presupposes that a pronominal *schize* is simply a discursive tool purposefully signaling the incapacity of language to speak for a silent, authentic and pre-lingual *I*. Beyond this discursive presupposition, however, is the symptomatic manifestation of the authentic *I* being defined by an originary split, by the agency that summons the *I* as a *you*, given that this pronominal cleavage testifies to a *différance* preceding the opposition between an internalized *I* and a radically externalized *you*: "*you* must go on, *I*'ll go on."

presumably “unreadable” writing, all signal an underlying state of *cacophony* rather than of *aphasia*. The descent in a womb-like comatose state does not describe a pre-lingual and aphasic retreat, but the *shattering* of univocal speech, the becoming-multiple-of-the-same.<sup>36</sup>

The hypothesis of what we have identified already from *the Unnamable* as Beckett’s *vagitus uterinus* (the voices inside the womb) may be verified throughout the remaining of his work, particularly in the later texts, such as in *Company*, from 1980. That very text is entirely based on the structure of the *vagitus uterinus*: a subject in a womb-like state being assailed by an unidentifiable voice. A speechless man lies in the dark, motionless, paralyzed, in a vast and unknown location, while a voice comes to him, speaking of him, of the voice itself, and of a third unidentified and absent person. The entire text speaks *in the place* of the voice coming out of the dark, through which the man becomes aware of himself, and to us, readers. Evidently, the voice functions as a “stolen” or “spirited” speech for the man lying in the dark, in that it is the only means for him to “know” himself, through the agency of the other. But what the voice describes remains unverifiable to the man, and to the reader. In fact we cannot fully comprehend the man’s *actual* condition, neither can we hear him tell his story *in his own words*. Any knowledge brought to us (and to the man himself) is mediated by this voice, beyond any

---

<sup>36</sup> We find in the short play *That Time* one explicit example of this cacophony, being the proof of multiple fractures within the I, as the silent character on stage listens to three consecutive voices, A, B and C, speak of this originary division itself: “... or making up talk breaking up two or more talking to himself being together that way where none ever came.” Samuel Beckett, “That Time,” in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume III, Dramatic works*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006, 422. [Henceforth referred to as Vol III That Time]. « ...ou devisant tout seul se divisant en plusieurs pour se tenir compagnie là où jamais nul ne venait. Samuel Beckett, « Cette fois, » in *Catastrophe et autres dramaticules*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1982, 20. [Henceforth referred to as Cette Fois].



accountability.<sup>37</sup> The text thus functions on the basis of an originary split, which becomes evident again through the cleavage of pronouns, as indicated below. Importantly, the *split* between the man and the voice, allowing for the voice to come from the other, which at once inaugurates the text yet makes it obscure to the reader, is also at work in uncanny ways in Beckett's *translation* of his own text. Close to the beginning of the text, the voice establishes for the reader (and for the man in the dark) the distribution of pronouns, thus setting the rules of the readability of the text:

Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third that cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a *first*. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not. [Vol IV Company 427, my emphasis].

L'emploi de la deuxième personne est le fait de la voix. Celui de la troisième de l'autre. Si lui pouvait parler à qui et de qui parle la voix il y aurait une *troisième*. Mais il ne le peut pas. Il ne le fera pas. Tu ne le peux pas. Tu ne le feras pas.<sup>38</sup>

As we will examine further, the condition for the intelligibility of the text/voice

---

<sup>37</sup> "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine./To one on his back in the dark. This he can tell by the pressure on his hind parts by how the dark changes when he shuts his eyes and again when he opens them again. Only a small part of what is said can be verified. As for example when he hears, You are on your back in the dark. Then he must acknowledge the truth of what is said. But by far the greater part of what is said cannot be verified." Samuel Beckett, "Company," in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume IV, Poems, Short fiction, Criticism*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006 427. [Henceforth referred to as Vol IV Company]. As often in Beckett, the use of the third person singular becomes a replacement of the first person singular, as indicated in the following paragraph.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Compagnie*, Trans. Into French by the author, Paris : Editions de minuit, 1979, 9, my emphasis. [Henceforth referred to as Compagnie]

subscribes, in Beckett, to the modality of a *non-literal translation* between different languages, in accordance with the cleavage of the pronouns: Beckett's "translation" of the *first* (person singular) into *une troisième* (third person singular), as it occurs here from the original English to the translated French, is not a simple "error" of translation. It assimilates the fundamental law of "writing" to the law of "translation": a continual *shift* and splitting of the pronouns, the impossibility of accounting for the original.

Accordingly, as the text unfolds itself, it becomes less and less evident as to what agency lies behind the voice speaking in the dark. Is it the "first," the "second" or the "third" person speaking?

For why or? Why in another dark or in the same? And whose voice asking this  
 Who asks, Whose voice asking this? And answers, His soever who devises it all. In  
 the same dark as his creature or in another. For company. Who asks in the end,  
 Who asks? And in the end answers as above? And adds long after to himself,  
 Unless another still. Nowhere to be found. Nowhere to be sought. The unthinkable  
 last of all. Unnamable. Last person. I. Quick leave him. [Vol IV, Company p.434]<sup>39</sup>

The "unnamable" becomes merely another name for Beckett to designate the originary womb, that is, the "unthinkable" *I*, inhabited by a third, by the *originary* (M)other . This double bind at work in Beckett's writing brings together a nexus of terms, which ranges

---

<sup>39</sup> "Car pourquoi ou? Pourquoi dans un autre noir ou dans le même? Et qui le demande ? Et qui demande, qui le demande ? Et répond, Celui qui qu'il soit qui imagine le tout. Dans le même noir que sa créature ou dans un autre. Pour se tenir compagnie. Qui demande en fin de compte, Qui demande en fin de compte ? Et en fin de compte répond comme ci-dessus. En ajoutant tout bas longtemps après, A moins que ce ne soit un autre encore. Nulle part à trouver. Nulle part à chercher. L'impensable ultime. Innommable. Toute première personne. Je. Vite motus. » [*Compagnie* 31]

here from “the unnamable” to the “last person I,” “the unthinkable last of all,” which is to say “the other.”

The law of a non-literal “translation” between these terms belongs to the law of “writing” itself, translating “the unnamable” to “l’innommable,” “the first” to “le troisième,” and as we will see, “breath” to “whisper” and finally to “*le souffle*.”

Somewhere in-between the desire for the bliss of a comatose state and the imposition of the foreclosed language lies some of the most important Beckettian motifs, whose undecidable functions determine the underlying structure of his writing: the belch [*rot*], the spit [*crachat*], the vagitus [*vagissement*], the birth cry [*vagissement*], the breath [*souffle*], and the whisper [*souffle*].

### **The Theatrical Turn: Giving Breath**

... tout ça qui fut dehors quand ça cesse de  
 haleter des bribes en moi dix secondes  
 quinze secondes tout ça plus bas faible  
 moins clair mais le sens en moi quand ça  
 s’apaise le souffle on parle d’un souffle gage  
 de vie quand ça s’apaise tel un dernier dans  
 la lumière puis reprend cent dix cent quinze

à la minute quand ça s'apaise dix secondes  
quinze secondes...

Samuel Beckett - *Comment c'est*

[...all that once without scraps in me when  
the panting stops ten seconds fifteen seconds  
all that fainter weaker less clear but the  
purport in me when it abates the breath  
we're taking of a breath token of life when it  
abates like a last in the light then resumes a  
hundred and ten fifteen to the minute when  
it abates ten seconds fifteen seconds...

Samuel Beckett - *How it is*]

One of the significant shifts following Beckett's "revelation," after the end of World War II, is the gradual turn to both theatrical writing and the French language, which became for him a vehicle and a sign of detachment from both his native tongue and that language of his omniscient mentor, James Joyce. Beckett was reported saying that the shift from English to French was motivated by finding a language that allowed his writing to become "without style," to "cut away the excess, to strip down the color" [Knowlson 324]. This double shift does not simply describe a historical progression in Beckett's work, but more importantly, as we have established, points to a more general

structure of the interplay between his “life” and “work,” between his *bio* and his *text*. In some ways, the progression toward theater serves as an acknowledgment of the path already set forth by Beckett’s revelation in his mother’s room, insofar as the event of the “vision” belongs itself to a form of “theatricality,” one which structures his writing through so-called “aporetic inscriptions.” Beckett’s *actual* writing *for* the theater indicates, in our reading, a “quasi-acknowledgment” of what we have described as an omnipresent structure of “theatricality” *underlying* his entire writing. This “theatrical writing,” which is broader in scope than his writing for the theater, enacts a double movement of continual erasure and re-birth through self-impoverishment, lack of control or self-knowledge. Driven by an unnamable agency, this writing defines indeed what Derrida has called the fundamental “law of theatrical writing” [« la loi de l’écriture théâtrale », ED, 287]. As Derrida puts it: « Pour que le théâtre ne soit soumis à cette structure de langage ni abandonné à la spontanéité de l’inspiration furtive, on devra le régler selon la nécessité d’un autre langage et d’une autre écriture » [ED 286]. As we have seen, this other writing precedes the separation between “being” and “art” and signals the originary event of the re-birth, in ways that are closely related to the Artaudian notion of “cruelty,” i.e. “theater” both preceding and transforming the category of “life.” Artaud famously states in the opening of *le Théâtre et son double*: « Il faut croire à un sens de la vie renouvelé par le théâtre, et où l’homme impavide se rend le maître de ce qui n’est pas encore et le fait naître. Et tout ce qui n’est pas né peut encore naître pourvu que nous ne nous contentions pas de demeurer simples organes d’enregistrement »<sup>40</sup>. The notion of “mastery” through theater over the “life to come”

---

<sup>40</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Oeuvres* édition établie, présentée et annotée par Evelyne Grossman,

ought to be put into the context of the *impouvoir*, provoked by what Artaud names theatrical “cruelty,” or the more Beckettian “impotence,” which does not describe a state of absolute passivity, but an active welcoming of an unforeseeable “life-to-come,” triggered by the recognition of “folly.”

Following these remarks, it is now evident that Beckett’s theatrical turn, in 1945, from *Watt* to *Waiting for Godot*, does not only indicate a gradual *shift* from the novel to the theatrical medium. This pivotal period will also determine Beckett’s insatiable need to innovate on new media available to him, what we call today “media art.” Following his constant desire for shifting, his work leads to simultaneous creations for the radio and television, including such elements as music, or choreography. In our present elaboration, the *turn* itself, the successive *shift* from one medium to another, is in essence *theatrical*. But within the theatrical field alone, Beckett’s pieces have also gradually *shrunk* and embraced an increasingly *impoverished* writing, in the form of plays with no characters, dialogue, storyline, or even intelligible language. From the early “absurd plays” such as *Waiting for Godot*, *End Game*, or *Happy Days*, Beckett moves gradually to a more minimalist writing for the “dramaticules,” a somewhat unprecedented “genre” in western theater. The most radical of those minimalist plays is the 1969 piece called *Breath* (translated by the author in French as *Souffle*). This small piece is scarcely analyzed and discussed because of what will be shown to be central to my elaboration of *theatricality*, that is, its complete lack of *articulated* elements in the play. It consists of a 30 second

---

Paris: Quatro Gallimard, 2004, 509. [Henceforth referred to as Artaud Oeuvres] "We must believe in a sense of life renewed by the theater, a sense of life in which man fearlessly makes himself master of what does not yet exist, and brings it into being. And everything that has not been born can still be brought to life if we are not satisfied to remain mere recording organisms." Artaud, Antonin, *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, New York: Grove Press, 1958, 13.

piece with no spoken text, no actor, and even more importantly, absolutely no *live* performance of any kind, which will become particularly important by the end of this chapter. While there is no “actor” on stage at any moment, Beckett’s stage directions also require that all of the audio – namely the “breath” itself – be *tape recorded* prior to the play. We must also note that *Breath* was first submitted as part of a collection for *erotic* pieces. If there is no ostensible erotic element to that play, in that there is no human body involved, this attribution may nevertheless recall the function of satyrs in ancient Greece which, in addition to being broadly erotic plays, were produced as *supplements* to the main theatrical pieces: the tragedies. In similar ways, this piece was conceived by Beckett to function somewhat as a *supplement* to other “actual” plays. This piece was meant to be produced *in between* two plays, or two acts. One discovers the function of this piece as being, quite literally, *not* a dramatic piece, or something other than what traditionally is considered as theater. Not accidentally, Beckett stresses, not in the original English, but in its French translation, the following additional sub-title: *Intermède* [Interlude].

In the following quotation, I have transcribed the *entire* play *twice*, both in English and in French. In doing so, I would like to analyze 1) the very notion of “breath” as being an *inarticulate* invocation of the “mother” and 2) the process involved in the notion of “breath” as exceeding the boundaries of the original text and affecting the very process of its translation. As indicated before, there is in Beckett a pattern of *resistance* to *literal* translation following the same logic as his “writing”: the need for constant re-invention. Furthermore, the untranslatable element of the text – both in form and content – which forbids literal translation, will prove to be nothing other than *le souffle* itself. Beckett’s play relies on two elements that we have already established as being at the

center of his writing: the originary movement of “breath” being transformed into an inarticulate *vagitus uterinus*.

BREATH	SOUFFLE
CURTAIN	INTERMÈDE
1. Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold about five seconds.	1. Noir
2. Faint brief cry and immediately inspiration and slow increase of light together reaching maximum together in about ten seconds. Silence and hold for about five seconds.	2. Faible éclairage sur un espace jonché de vagues détritrus. Tenir 5 secondes.
3. Expiration and slow decrease of light together reaching minimum together (light as in 1) in about ten seconds and immediately cry as before. Silence and hold about five seconds.	3. Cri faible et bref et aussitôt bruit d’inspiration avec lente montée de l’éclairage atteignant ensemble le maximum au bout de 10 secondes. Silence. Tenir 5 secondes.
	4. Bruits d’expiration avec lente chute de l’éclairage atteignant ensemble leur minimum au bout de 10 secondes et aussi cri comme avant. Silence. Tenir 5 secondes.
	5. Noir.

<sup>41</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Breath,” in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume III, Dramatic Works*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006, 401.



CURTAIN

RUBBISH: No verticals, all scattered and lying.

CRY: Instant of recorded vagitus. Important that two cries be identical, switching on and off strictly synchronized light and breath.

BREATH: Amplified recording.

MAXIMUM LIGHT: Not bright. If 0 = dark and 10 = bright, light should move from about 3 to 6 and back.<sup>41</sup>

Détritus – Eparpillement confus. Rien debout.

Cri – Bref extrait d’un vagissement enregistré. Essentiel que les deux cris soient identiques, celui qui au commencement lance le tandem souffle-lumière et celui qui l’arrête à la fin.

Souffle – Enregistrement amplifié. Essentiel que les deux phases inspiration-expiration soient bien différenciées.

Eclairage maximum – Pas très fort. Si 0 = obscurité et 10 = clarté la navette est de 3 à 6 environ et retour.<sup>42</sup>

The French version of the play recalls Beckett’s recurring fascination with nothingness (*le rien*), which marks both the beginning and the end of the work. Beckett insistence, in the French version, on differentiating between the first and the second part of the breath, but also emphasizing the *sameness* between the first and the second cry (he

<sup>42</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Souffle,” in *Comédie et actes divers*. Translated into French by the author. Paris : Minuit, 1966, 137.

refers to both as “recorded *vagitus*”), may suggest an opposition between the instances of darkness [*Noir*] and the middle section marked by five seconds of brightness. Silence, however, marks the beginning, the middle, and the end of the breath. The inspiration does not end with spoken words, which would in become silenced once more by the end of the expiration. The omnipresent silence suggests a *sameness* between the state of darkness and that of light. In effect, these remarks contradict Beckett’s own *retroactive* commentary on his play: “I realized when too late to repent that it is not unconnected with: On entre, on crie et c'est la vie. On crie, on sort et c'est la mort” [Knowlson 501]. This retroactive reading seems indeed limited if not only for the fact that the cry of “birth” and the cry of “death” mentioned by Beckett are *both* described in the play as a *vagitus*: a *birth* cry. Contrary to Beckett’s own claim, I will propose that the so-called “death,” i.e. the completion of the act of breathing, functions in effect as another “birth”: a new birth, a re-birth. We have identified earlier in this chapter a similar motif, “the belch” [*le rot*] of the starveling, as the undecidable space in between [*entre*] “common” language and the silent “bliss of coma” [The Unnamable 318]. Evidently, the “odorless belch” of the dying man, before he falls back into darkness, also compares, for Beckett as inferred now from *Breath*, to the birth of a newborn. This short play does not uphold “breath” as a metaphor for the duration of a lifetime, as suggested after the fact by the author himself, nor does it radically oppose “life” to “death.” Rather the play turns the theatrical space and time into a space-in-between [*antre*], and quite *literally*, the space and time of *one* breath occurring between the last and the next, in constant negotiation between life and death. Maurice Blanchot identified the temporality of Beckett’s writing

as that of *le mourir* [the (never-ending) dying], as in « on ne cesse pas et on n'en finit pas de mourir». <sup>43</sup>

Blanchot's choice of word goes far beyond the level of commentary on Beckett's "work;" it reaches a deeper "zone of being" related to the always present *maternal* figure in Beckett, which translates indeed in the experience of an *unending dying*. Blanchot's wording reflects with unexpected accuracy Beckett's *actual* confrontation, at her deathbed, with his *dying* mother, in the summer of 1950, who was by then hit by dementia due to Parkinson's disease. Beckett's rendition of this experience echoes the same structure we have just described in *Breath*, connecting the movement of "breathing" to Blanchot's *le mourir*: "My mother's life continues in a sad decline. It is like the decrescendo of a train I used to listen to at night at Ussy, interminable, starting up again just when one thinks it is over and silence restored forever" [Knowlson 346]. The silence that, in *Breath*, marks the beginning, the middle, and the end, recalls similarly the immanent possibility of death which never comes: the silence is traversed, modified, postponed by the deep and indefinite breathing of May, never completely alive, nor completely dead; never silent, nor speaking. The experience of *Breath*, that of spectators in the theater, parallels Beckett's own experience confronting the breath of the (M)other: absent, passing, spectral, *recorded*. Accordingly, I would infer that Beckett's *theatricality*, as described here, consists in re-iterating, in the theater, an experience similar to that of bearing witness to (and receiving) the (M)other's (dying) *breath*. Paradoxically, as far as Beckett is concerned, the "mother's" breath survives beyond her own death: it is spectral, haunting Beckett, in his writing and life alike.

---

<sup>43</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espèce littéraire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955, 202.

Let us examine the precise transition through which the notion of “breath” becomes, in Beckett, integral to the notion of “whisper,” i.e. a “whispered speech.” The *shift* from “whisper” to “breath” participates once again in the process of a non-literal translation. The piece for television entitled *Eh Joe* belongs to the many late works by Beckett which, similar to *Company*, take up the motif of a foreclosed voice coming from an unknown origin and addressing, or rather *harassing*, a speechless, tortured, disempowered character. The following excerpt, transcribed here in the original English alongside Beckett’s own translation into French, occurs in between two camera shots focusing alternatively on the character’s body and face. Beckett’s general description of the character’s face in the preliminary instructions must be mentioned before hand. The face’s reaction to voice, which successively emerges from silence and disappears back into it, is reminiscent once again of Beckett’s own confrontation with the rhythm of breathing of the dying mother, as described earlier, and of course of the piece called *Breath*:

Face: Practically motionless throughout, eyes unblinking during paragraphs, impassive except in so far as it reflects mounting tension of listening. Brief zones of relaxation between paragraphs *when perhaps voice has relented for the evening and intentness may relax variously till restored by voice resuming*. [my emphasis]

44

As in the great majority of cases in Beckett, the unknown voice is that of a woman:

---

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Eh Joe,” in *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett. Volume III, Dramatic Works*, ed. by Paul Auster, New York, Grove Press, 2006, 392. [Henceforth referred to as Eh Joe].

How you admired my elocution ! ...  
 Among other charms .... Voice like flint  
 glass .... To borrow your expression ....  
 Powerful grasp of language you had ....  
 Flint glass .... You could have listened to it  
 for ever .... And now this .... Squeezed  
 down to this .... How much longer would  
 you say? ... Till the *whisper* .... You know  
 .... When you *can't hear the words* .... Just  
 the odd one here and there .... That's the  
 worst .... Isn't it, Joe? ... Isn't that what you  
 told me .... Before we expire .... The odd  
 word .... Straining to hear .... Why must  
 you do that? ... When you're nearly home  
 .... *What matter then* .... *What we mean* ....  
 It should be the best .... Nearly home again  
 .... Another *stilled* .... And it's the worst ....  
 Isn't that what you said? ... The *whisper* ....  
 The odd word .... Straining to hear .... Brain  
 tired squeezing .... It stops in the end ....  
 You stop it in the end .... Imagine if you  
 couldn't .... Ever think of that? .... If it went

“Que ma diction te plaisait !... Un  
 ravissement de plus... Du cristal de roche  
 ma voix... Pour emprunter ton  
 expression... Ah pour frapper une phrase...  
 Du cristal de roche... Tu ne pouvais t'en  
 rassasier... Un peu voilée à présent... La  
 gorge... Combien de temps encore selon  
 toi ?... Jusqu'au *souffle*... Tu sais, *quand*  
*le sens t'échappe*... Juste *un petit mot par-*  
*ci par-là*... C'est ça le pire, non ?... Dis  
 Joe... Pas ça que tu m'as dit ?... Nos  
 extrémités... Le petit mot par-ci par-là ...  
 L'effort pour saisir... Pourquoi ça, Joe ?...  
 Qu'est-ce qui te fait faire ça ?... Quand tu  
 es presque rendu... Qu'importe à ce  
 moment là ?... Ce que nous chantons là...  
 Ça devrait être le meilleur... Presque rendu  
 encore une fois... Encore un *asphyxié*... Et  
 c'est le pire... Pas ça que tu m'as dit ?...  
 Le *souffle*... Le petit mot par-ci par-là...  
 L'effort pour saisir... La tête lasse de  
 serrer... Et si tu n'y arrivais pas ?... Jamais

<p>on .... The whisper in your head .... <i>Me</i>  <i>whispering at you in your head</i> .... <i>Things</i>  <i>you can't catch</i> .... On and off .... Till you  join us .... Eh Joe? [Eh Joe 394, my  emphases]</p>	<p>pensé à ça ?... Dis Joe... Si ça continuait...  <i>Le souffle dans ta tête</i>... Moi dans ta tête te  soufflant des choses... <i>Dont le sens</i>  <i>t'échappe</i>... Jusqu'à ce que tu viennes...  Te joindre à nous... Dis Joe... ».<sup>45</sup></p>
---	--

This paragraph, like those already examined, is particularly characteristic of Beckett's resistance to literal translation. It addresses explicitly the question of the inability to understand what seems to be nonetheless spoken (more or less) in plain words. Let us first highlight the primary outcome of this bilingual juxtaposition. The notion of "whisper" (whispered voice, whispered speech) and the notion of "breath" (one we extracted earlier from a play by the same name) are being both translated in French as: *souffle*. Additionally, this "whispered" speech adopts the same fragmented structure as "breath" that we described earlier, i.e. it is punctuated by what Beckett identifies as momentary lapses of speech, silences in between paragraphs and clauses. Even more importantly, in this particular piece, the voice seems to acknowledge explicitly its inability to be heard, understood, or become meaningful. Beckett's own translation into French becomes once again "inaccurate." Those momentary lapses of translation are nevertheless particularly revealing: "Me whispering at you in your head .... Things you can't catch ...." is translated as "Le souffle dans ta tête... Moi dans ta tête te soufflant des choses... Dont le sens t'échappe... ," whose *literal* translation would be closer to the following : "the *whisper/breath* in your head... me in your head *whispering* things to

---

<sup>45</sup> Samuel Beckett, "Dis Joe," in *Comédie et actes divers*, trans. by the author, Paris :

you/*breathing* things into you... whose *meanings escape you...*” While stressing the impossibility of catching the meaning, one of Beckett’s “mis-translations” occurs when the voice refers to the character as “stilled,” which he revealingly translates into French as “*asphyxié*.” The unbridgeable gap between these translations, the shifting of the terms, work in parallel with the text’s own fragmentation by silences and interruptions, depicting Beckett’s characters along with his writing as indeed “asphyxiated.” While this incoming voice takes the role of the whisperer, or prompter, it effectively invalidates the classical structure of the “muse” as a source of “inspiration.” In effect, Beckett’s theater is rather subject to a constant process of “expiration,” i.e. *dying*, *le mourir* of Maurice Blanchot.

We may therefore say that these “mis-translations” are by no means “incorrect” translations, but enact the very “inarticulate” process of origination of writing itself: i.e. the structure of *la parole soufflée*. The difference in meaning that one language brings to the other, without reproducing the original meaning of a specific term, testifies to the fundamental *shift* in the structure of *pneuma* as examined in the introduction. Instead of transferring signifying structures, Beckett’s translations consist in the transfer of an inarticulate *breath* between languages, as *breath* indicates writing’s singular *resistance* to the structures of signification in respect to a particular language.

I would like to end this reading by underlining a structural proximity between the notion of “breath” and Beckett’s recurring use of media, technology, *techné*, as the manifestation of what we can call the *ghost*. We may now speak of “breath” in terms of a *translation* occurring between the stage and the spectators – translation as a form of

---

Minuit, 1966, pp.86-67, my emphases.

transfer, transference, and transliteration – that paradoxically puts into question the notion of “living” in both the “performing arts” and what Beckett calls the “zone of being.” The translation of “breath” into “unending dying” (*le mourir*) underlines a structure belonging neither to “life” nor “death” as such, but to the in-between state [*l’antre*] of what we call, all metaphors set aside, the “living-dead” [*le mort-vivant*], the spectral figure surviving its own death [*le revenant*], the ghost that dislocates and displaces the immanence of “life” from the field of the “living arts.” The “exchange of breath” taking place in the theater, for instance, between actor and spectator, also connects the act of “breathing” – the most fundamental condition to life – to that of “receiving,” taking and enacting the breath of the (M)other. In other words, the immanence of life, always re-enacted through the act of breathing, reveals itself as the re-iteration and the re-enactment of the (M)other’s death, as that which survives without existing entirely in the present. The basic structure of theater and theatrical “performance,” based on notions of re-iteration and re-enactment, operates on a spectral mode of *theatricality* that exceeds the “living” dimension of the theatrical medium. We may note then that one of Beckett’s radical contributions to the theater was his new innovative approach to “repetition” by means of *recording devices* on stage, thus minimizing the “living” quality of theater to uphold rather an *automated*, a *mechanistic* mediation. As in *Breath*, which is deprived of any form of live performance, he re-introduces the “dead” into the “living” art, and in that sense (in the sense of “live” communication made impossible) his later turn to radio and to television indicates indeed that the “dead” inherent to his “theatricality” is increasingly prevailing over the “living” of the dramatic art. We have noted in *Krapp’s Last Tape* as well as in *Breath* the function



of the recording device as a medium for bringing back – from the dead – a particular experience related to the Mother, more particularly her “dying breath.” The instances are too many. But all instances of recordings indicate in Beckett the *limits of articulation* as the return (from the dead) of an unspeakable agency responsible for the act of origination. The main character of *Ghost Trio*, for instance, though entirely speechless, keeps a tape recorder by his side at all times – a particular scene reminiscent of Krapp – though he *never* uses it. A number of radio plays – *Rough for Theater I*, *Words and Music*, *Cascando* – are based on the double function of a device broadcasting, on the one hand, a voice uttering an incomprehensible speech, and on the other hand, a continuously played piece of music. The function of recorded music in Beckett, and its relation to *pneuma*, requires an entire study of its own. But we may simply suggest that music, never live, always *recorded*, re-enacts the same function as that of the breath and the whispers: i.e. music as the ashes of *burnt signification*.

## Chapter 2

### **Koltès-Narcissus: the Genesis of Theatrical Writing**

*... tu étais moi ...*

Letter to his mother

18 Juillet 1965

Investigating the origin of Bernard-Marie Koltès' theatrical texts leads one to ask the question of the "genesis" of theatrical writing in general, prior to any aesthetic categorization. Recalling Antonin Artaud's "cruelty," this retreat reminds us that theatricality through writing threatens the frontiers of the theatrical apparatus, i.e. of representation. This writing draws a deeper connection, in Koltès particularly, between theater and life, as theater is ascribed a generative function. Koltès posits the privilege of theater over life through the following paradoxical axiom: « l'enjeu du théâtre devient : quitter le théâtre pour retrouver la vraie vie ».<sup>46</sup> This axiom institutes theater as generative but also as overwhelming the category of the dramatic genre. The search for the origin of this writing requires one to locate, from within the work of Koltès, the moment when writing institutes itself as "theater," and simultaneously authorizes the coming to life of the speaking "self." Although the effort to "inscribe," "locate" and "date" the origin of theatrical writing is itself paradoxical – for such an event escapes in principle the process of *sign*-ification, dating, or identification –, we may follow Koltès' own claim in

---

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Alain Prique, *Theater Heute*, 3<sup>e</sup> trimestre 1983, reprinted in *Une Part de ma vie, Entretiens (1983-1989)*, Minuit, 1999, hereafter referred to as PV, p. 55. [reviewed by Koltès]

identifying the particular text that, he says, authorized him to call himself a writer, and more particularly a playwright. The one-sentence monologue from 1977, *la Nuit juste avant les forêts*, was continuously referred to as the “true” beginning of his theatrical writing – « ma première pièce », he repeatedly said during his interviews.<sup>47</sup> The purpose of this study will be to examine the ways in which this text presents itself as originary, not only of the work but also of the writer. We may examine the ways in which this particular text functions as the womb of Koltès’ writing, or as the stage director Philip Boulay suggests, as the *matrix* of his entire work. Of particular interest is Koltès’ remarkable articulation of the mechanism through which his non-dramatic, monological writing relates to what he will call “the incomprehensible maternal tongue.” By the end of this chapter, the practice of citationality will reveal to be a separation from, reference to – or is a symptom of – the maternal body, inarticulate and irrecoverable, resulting in the text’s self-acknowledged failure to quote *properly* its own place of origin.

### **Citing the Silent Tongue: Koltès’ Monologues**

Identified as the origin of Koltès’ theatrical writing by none other than the author himself, *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* may strike one as an odd choice, for a number of reasons. By 1977, Koltès had already written and produced a number of different plays for the stage and for the radio, along with an adaptation of one of his earliest plays, *Récits morts*, into an avant-garde, low budget film, *La Nuit perdue*. In what respect is the status of *La*

---

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Colette Godard, *Le Monde*, 13 juin 1986, reprinted in PV p. 68.

*Nuit juste avant les forêts* singularly different from those of the previous plays? What constitutes in that play a double movement of a break from and a renewal of theater? We may examine the ways in which this particular monologue produces a series of *uncanny* events in respect to Koltès' work and theater, from the first moment when one takes into one's hands the 56-page sentence, in its 1988 published format of *les Editions de Minuit*. The first and most apparent peculiarity of this text is the following: « ma première pièce », as the author puts it, is *technically* speaking not a theatrical play. First, in contrast with conventional practices of publishers in France, the cover bears no sign of this text's exact literary genre. This editorial peculiarity already announces a set of different uncanny events that exempt this text from any formal categorization. Its undecidable status also draws a remarkable affinity to yet one other exception: the much later and celebrated *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, which also bears no mark of genre on its cover. Koltès consistently defined *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, not as a play, but simply as a “dialogue” that may, eventually, be adapted to the stage, as did Patrice Chéreau in 1987, de facto introducing the dialogue to the general public through a theatrical lens and leading critics to categorize it as a play. The structural connection between these two texts occurs at the point when Koltès defines the “dialogue” as being constituted of two incompatible and irreconcilable “monologues”: « Pour moi, un vrai dialogue est toujours une argumentation, comme faisaient les philosophes, mais détournée. Chacun répond à côté, et ainsi le texte se balade. Quand une situation exige un dialogue, il est la confrontation de deux monologues qui cherchent à cohabiter ».<sup>48</sup> As we will make it clear, the uncompromising, quasi-hermetic function of the monologue of *La*

---

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Hervé Guibert, « Comment porter sa condamnation », *Le Monde*, Février 1983, reprinted in *PV* p. 23. [reviewed par Koltès]

*Nuit juste avant les forêts* accordingly overwhelms the conventional law of the theatrical genre by submitting itself to a non-dialogical and non-dramatic form of theatrical writing, whose axiom reads quite simply as: « il n'y a rien à dire ».

Following this note, Christophe Bident suggests that Koltès' monological phrase engages in a process of deconstructing the theatrical apparatus through what he calls a « poéticité non représentée », displacing theatrical language in the “poetics” of an utterly non-dramatic language. Accordingly, « ce monologue inscrit une parole autre dans la parole théâtrale », <sup>49</sup> redefining theater not through *another* speech, but through the *other* of dramatic speech. If *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* is to be considered as the beginning of Koltès' writing, it will do so by instituting the birth of theater *outside* of the theatrical genre and in the place of *dramatic* silences.

As a second peculiarity suggesting that the text originates from outside the theatrical genre, one finds right at the first page of the monologue, before the first word of the sentence, and after the last word, on the last page, circumscribing what the text itself calls « sa grande phrase », two quotations marks. Koltès wrote the text in 1977 with the specific intention that it be performed, or rather “spoken” on stage, in the “off” of the Festival d'Avignon, during the summer of that year, by his friend and actor Yves Ferry. From a historical standpoint, no doubt remains, *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* is a play destined for an actor on stage. More importantly however, it is also – and before all – a quotation, one that makes no reference to any character at the origin of its enunciation. Bident asserts quite accurately that, though the text was written for the stage, the quotation marks « lui ôtent toute dimension dialogique, théâtrale » [Bident 54]. This text

---

<sup>49</sup> Christophe Bident, *Bernard-Marie Koltès, Généalogies*, Tours, Farrago, 2000, p. 55, hereafter referred to as Bident.

challenges the traditional structure of theater, but also simultaneously redefines the entire practice of citationality from a new unconventional and strange angle. As Bident puts it: « ouvert et clos par des guillemets, ce texte théâtral est étrangement présenté comme une citation, une citation sans source, sans identité d'énonciation ou de profération. Dire que le personnage est anonyme est accorder encore trop de crédit à toute postulation dramatique » [Bident 83]. More than the monological quality of the text, it is in fact its citationality – lacking a proper source – that both *separates* it from and, according to the author's judgment, *institutes* it as “true” theater. To Bident's “strangeness” of the quotation marks circumscribing a sentence with no original source, one might add the strange fact that the majority of Koltès' plays preceding *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* – those the author retroactively rejected as not being theater – were all in all a series of *actual* extensive quotations and textual adaptations of such prominent sources as Dostoyevsky, Gorki, Shakespeare, Salinger, or *le Cantique des cantique*. One may simply point here to the fact that while keeping some sort of fidelity to these original sources, these early texts already embraced citationality as a means for altering, sometimes even re-writing those original texts.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> The plays previous to *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* engage in rigorous practices of citationality (or *iterability*, in the derridian sense), that is both the *repetition* of an original text and its *alteration* for the purpose of adaptation. « Etre ou pas? C'est la question. »<sup>50</sup> *Le Jour des meurtres dans l'histoire d'Hamlet*, for instance, written in 1974, is a “condensed” adaptation of Shakespeare's play with only four characters, borrowing from extensive quotations from Yves Bonnefoy's French translation of the original play. Koltès keeps from Shakespeare what he considered to be the ‘essence’ of the original text; no doubt, to his taste there was a surplus of words in “être ou ne pas être? Là est la question,” which the act of citation naturally washed clean. Similarly, in *La Marche*, from 1970, Koltès borrows extensive quotations from *le Cantique des cantiques*, translated from Hebrew by Henri Meschonnic, and he adds, as he did in his *Hamlet*, large addendums of his own writing. In a peculiar though revealing gesture, to which we will come back at a later stage, Koltès' supplements often function as a redoubling of the

Then how does the function of citationality in *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* differ from those of the previous texts? If Koltès engages here in that practice, whom is he quoting? From what body of text does his “grande phrase” originate? The practice of citationality – which Koltès therefore associates with the birth of theater – presents itself as the attempt to recall the event of origination. The particularity of *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* consists in being admittedly the first text, in a long series, instituting the quotation as a prolongation of an original textual body that remains entirely irrecoverable, unidentifiable and even inarticulate on its own. The quotation marks forbid any form of articulation, knowledge, or even identification of the original body of text. These marks function then as the trace of an incision, a scar from a cleavage, and a split, signaling the originary event behind the written text. They similarly point to a particular event in the life narrative of the author,<sup>51</sup> a blind spot in Koltès’ consciousness

---

original text in the form of an *inverted* image. In *La Marche* particularly, Koltès sets about supplementing the original text of the scriptures, and its mythical and joyous description of the relationship between two lovers, with his own text on how claustrophobic, infernal and tormenting such a mythical relationship may also be.

<sup>51</sup> No doubt remains that a second major source of “inspiration,” other than texts from the canon of western literature, came directly from his personal life experiences, and more precisely inspired by particular geographical areas he lived in or visited. Among critics of Koltès and artists familiar with his work, this underlying connection between his personal life and his theater participates in what we will consistently refer to as the construction a ‘Koltésian mythology,’ often romantically compared to that of a Rimbaud: Life in Strasbourg, 1969 (*la Fuite à cheval très loin dans la ville*, 1975); life in Paris and later trip to Nicaragua 1978 (*La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, 1977); trip to a construction camp in Nigeria, 1978 (*Combat de nègre et de chiens*, 1979); four months trip to New York, nights spent in an abandoned warehouse by the Hudson river, 1983 (*Quai Ouest*, 1985, *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, 1985); childhood in Metz during the Algerian war (*le Retour au desert*, 1988); Encounter with the image of the fugitive murderer Roberto Succo in a subway train, later on TV screens, right before Succo’s death in 1988 (*Roberto Zucco*, 1988).

But the impact of citationality on the writing of Koltès, and the inaugural function of his theater in respect to his life, exceed any form of dramatic ‘mimetism.’ As we will discover shortly, the Koltésian articulation of theater subscribes to a function that not

surrounding the time of this monologue's conception. Koltès' very first interview, in 1983, with Jean-Pierre Han : « Il y a une coupure très nette entre *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* et la pièce qui précède. Il y a beaucoup de temps, trois ans; trois ans pendant lesquels je n'ai rien fait et où je pensais ne rien écrire. Et quand je me suis mis à écrire, c'était complètement différent, c'était un autre travail. »<sup>52</sup> Other interview in the same year with Hervé Guibert: « Pour *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, par exemple, si je ne me force pas, au bout d'un an, j'oublie ce que j'écris. Cette pièce-là, tout en cherchant à garder un intérêt pour elle, et à l'entretenir, je m'en suis détaché, je la relis comme une pièce étrangère. »<sup>53</sup> The two *gaps* inscribed around the time of the conception of this text, causing in effect the author to “forget” the content of his own writing, bracket the text as « une pièce étrangère ». In other words, for Koltès, it is as though that particular text were literally written by *another*. Foreclosed, originating from the exterior, uncanny in all respect, *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* redefines the process of writing as a form of citation, whose origin remains unknown, its agent unidentifiable, and its content forgettable.

The notion of “citationality” is deeply connected with what we have already identified as the structure of “souffle,” of *pneuma*. Koltès' relationship with his own text subscribes to the relationship described by Jacques Derrida regarding Artaud and his writing, in that it originates from *une parole soufflée*. I previously discussed extensively the double bind Derrida ascribes to this particular term, finding its roots in the ambiguous

---

only operates *outside* the realm of life (i.e. of its representation, articulation, and knowledge), but also happens *prior* to it. As Bident puts it, in Koltès, « l'acte théâtral est le négatif de l'acte autobiographique, de l'acte généalogique, de l'écriture de la vie » [Bident, p. 56].

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Jean-Pierre Han, *Europe*, 1<sup>er</sup> trimestre, 1983, reprinted in *PV* p. 10. [reviewed by Koltès]

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Hervé Guibert, « Comment porter sa condamnation », *Le Monde*, Février 1983, reprinted in *PV*, p. 17. [reviewed by Koltès]



Aristotelian notion of “connate” *pneuma*. What Koltès adds to our understanding of the structure of “souffle,” or of “une parole soufflée,” is to emphasize that the notion of *pneuma* is also subject to that of *citatorality*. Let us recall Derrida’s definition of *parole soufflée* as a process of *reiteration of the other’s speech*, who operates from outside the realm of representation:

Soufflée : entendons dérobée par un commentateur possible qui la reconnaît pour la ranger dans un ordre, ordre de vérité essentielle ou de structure réelle, psychologique ou autre. [...] Soufflée : entendons du même coup inspirée depuis une autre voix, lisant elle-même un texte plus vieux que le poème de mon corps, que le théâtre du geste. L’inspiration, c’est, à plusieurs personnages, le drame du vol, la structure du théâtre classique où l’invisibilité du souffleur assure la différence et le relais indispensable entre un texte déjà écrit d’une autre main et un interprète déjà dépossédé de cela même qu’il reçoit.<sup>54</sup>

The underlying notion of *souffle* – as both “inspiration” and “expiration,” birth and death at once – and that of a *parole* that belongs not to the speaker, but to *le souffleur* (the prompter), institutes the origin of speech in the *other*, who possesses my language yet operates from outside the realm of intelligibility. Koltès’ writing, that of *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* particularly, institutes itself as a citation – *soufflée* – from another, who can no longer be simply identified as Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky.

The quotation marks, for Koltès, therefore signal that which may *not* be represented on a theatrical stage, escaping intelligible speech, while in fact appearing at

---

<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence*, Seuil, 1967, p. 261-262, hereafter referred to as *ED*.

the *place* of dramatic silences. The incompatibility between the presently described function of citationality and the formal rules of the theatrical genre becomes all the more evident in one of Koltès' major plays from 1985, *Quai Ouest*. That play engages explicitly with the boundaries between genres, and more specifically with what exceeds those of theater. In the long series of notes from the play's appendix, engaging with issues of stage representation, speech in acting,<sup>55</sup> and also the *hybrid* genre to which the text itself belongs, Koltès revisits again the use of the quotation marks. Throughout the play, disparate chunks of monologues appear almost randomly between scenes, in quotation marks and inside parentheses, credited to different characters from the play. Referring to those quotations, Koltès notes: « Les passages entre guillemets et entre parenthèses, écrits comme des monologues romanesques, ne doivent bien sûr pas être joués; mais ce ne sont pas non plus des textes pour les programmes. Ils ont leur place, chacun entre deux scènes, pour la lecture de la pièce ; et c'est là qu'ils doivent rester. Car la pièce a été écrite à la fois pour être lue et pour être jouée. »<sup>56</sup> Constituting a textual

---

<sup>55</sup> The playwright's now celebrated approach to the actor's speech on stage demonstrates different strategies for hindering the effects of communication and intelligibility: « le texte, peut-être, est parfois trop long à jouer ; mais les acteurs, eux sont toujours trop lents. Ils ont une tendance à non pas dire les mots, mais les peser, les montrer, leur donner du sens. En fait, il faudrait toujours dire le texte comme un enfant récitant une leçon avec une forte envie de pisser, qui va très vite en se balançant d'une jambe sur l'autre, et qui, lorsqu'il a fini, se précipite pour faire ce qu'il a en tête depuis toujours », Bernard-Marie Koltès, « annexe », in *Quai ouest*, les Editions de Minuits, Paris: 1985 p.104, hereafter referred to as *QO*.

<sup>56</sup> Bernard-Marie Koltès, « annexe », in *QO* pp. 104-105. A number of scenes from *Quai Ouest* are marked by quotations – epigrams – from Hugo, Melville, Falkner, London, Conrad, Marivaux. Other scenes are separated by the above-mentioned monologues, in quotation marks, called “romanesques” by Koltès for not participating in the dramatic construction. Those monologues resonate however with *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, and of monologues in the later *Roberto Zucco*, subscribing in fact to poetic rather than novelistic language. Their particularity is that they also appear in quotation marks

inter-space that overflows the boundaries of dramatic representation and calls for the use of quotation marks, these monologues play an important function in respect to the origin Koltès' theatrical writing, beginning with the fact that they are excluded from the stage. The monologue of one particular character, Abad, is in fact symptomatic of this non-dramatic speech in that throughout the entire play he remains entirely mute, as far as dramatic speech is concerned. Abad, the foreigner, *whispers* to the ears of the other characters, never speaking aloud. In his particular monologue, however, one only "reads" his voice – silently – on the page, in between brackets. Abad's monologue presents itself as a confession of his inability to speak :

(« [...] [mon père] m'arracha mon nom et le jeta dans l'eau de la rivière avec les ordures, j'essaie de le dire ; des enfants naissent sans couleur nés pour l'ombre et les cachettes avec les cheveux blancs et la peau blanche et les yeux sans couleur, condamnés à courir de l'ombre d'un arbre à l'ombre d'un autre arbre et à midi lorsque le soleil n'épargne aucune partie de la terre à s'enfouir dans le sable ; à eux leur destinée bat le tambour comme la lèpre fait sonner les clochettes et le monde s'en accommode ; à d'autres, une bête, logée en leur cœur, reste et ne parle que lorsque règne le silence autour d'eux ; c'est la bête paresseuse qui s'étire lorsque tout le monde dort, et se met à mordiller l'oreille de l'homme pour qu'il se souvienne d'elle ; mais plus je le dis, plus je le cache, c'est pourquoi je n'essaierais plus, ne me demande plus qui je suis. » dit Abad.) [QO 19-20]

---

and are explicitly excluded from stage of representation, insofar as, according to the author, they are, from a dramatic perspective, *useless* or even *impossible* to stage.

Prior to this excerpt, Abad opens the monologue explaining the cause for his outright banishment from his home, the loss of his name and of articulation altogether: these were caused by a childhood event, which consisted in having encountered at one time, while walking in the street, the Devil. The monologue does not qualify as “romanesque” in any respect. In fact, the only difference one may find with *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* is that Koltès indicates the name of the character who is speaking at the end of the monologue, in the narrative form: “dit Abad.” Yet this bracketed monologue, ascribing the quoted speech to a character forced to remain silent on stage, simply try to explain – in a more poetic rather than novelistic language – the cause of his lack of (dramatic) speech. The allegory in Abad’s monologue articulates in so many words the failure of articulation: « mais plus je le dis, plus je le cache, c’est pourquoi je n’essaierais plus, ne me demande plus qui je suis. » Abad’s silences are transformed into a bracketed monologue, emerging from a different and incompatible registry: outside the stage of representation and theater as a mimetic form. Not coincidentally, the allegorical depiction of the origin of Abad’s lack of articulate speech is also a depiction of *the birth of monstrosity*. Besides its citational and *para*-dramatic functions, this monologue reiterates some of the main figures already set in motion in *la Nuit juste avant les forêts*. We read in Abad’s monologue that, despite “*le diable*” being at the origin of his inability to articulate – (one can hardly not recall the Socratic *daemon*) –, some children are already cursed by an unnatural birth, and an inhuman physiology. Monstrous themselves, they are destined to flee from the gaze into the shadows: « des enfants naissent sans couleur nés pour l’ombre; » other children, even though not beasts themselves, bear inside their hearts « la bête paresseuse ». A foreign body living inside the individual, yet an entirely different

entity in itself, the beast is gifted with speech, though different from regular speech: « ne parle que lorsque règne le silence. » It is a *bestial* speech occurring *in the place* of silence, at “sleeping time,” as the beast crawls and bites the man’s ear to remind him of its existence: it whispers to his ears a speech that remains audible to the individual alone, and is silent to all others. We will shortly see that this bestial speech echoes exactly the definition of what Koltès “*une langue maternelle*.”

Though bestiality takes many shapes in Koltès’ work – and not the least explicit is that of Roberto Zucco, a “modern hero” guilty of killing both his father and mother –, we are reminded here of two important facts. First, Koltès has indicated that citations are structurally both monological and theatrical, but that they are also, in respect to articulated speech, “monstrosities.” Quite literally, a citation is here a (textual) organ cut out from an original (textual) body, only to graft itself to another. The Frankenstein aspect of such a monstrosity should not go unnoticed in regard to Koltès’ treatment of citationality. It is all the more so that, as Elissa Marder notes, the question of monstrosity presents itself as a signal – a symptom – of the “mother,” the absent figure of origin. In embracing citationality, a textual production becomes in effect symptomatic of a “mother tongue” that is, in essence, inarticulate and silent. As Marder puts it in her readings of Racine’s *Phèdre* and Shelley’s *Frankenstein*:

The question of origins and the implicit impossibility of speaking about them is articulated through the figure of an absent mother who dictates and engenders the texts that circumscribe her absence. Both texts are haunted by the specter of a mother who is ultimately unspeakable. The horror that permeates these texts emanates from the figure of a mother confronting the indelible trace of an

offspring which she engenders but which is also foreign to her. Both works stage scenes of monstrous or unnatural childbirth which simultaneously recall and obliterate the strange affiliation between the mother and language.<sup>57</sup>

Koltèsian monstrosity, figures of children of unnatural birth, beasts whispering silently in the ears, all signal a bestial genealogy tracing back to the absent figure of the mother. In this Koltèsian mythology, figures of monstrosity point to the “mother” insofar as birth itself causes them to be monstrous – as far as that event describes a radical split, *un arrachement*, from the maternal body. For as Koltès confesses: « C’est à cause de moi que ma mère n’a pas eu d’autres enfants. A la naissance, j’ai tout arraché, tout cassé. »<sup>58</sup>

The last of three children, all boys, Bernard-Marie sees himself as having despoiled and sterilized the mother’s uterus, while his birth, unnatural in that respect, became a split from the maternal body, a wrenching of her flesh *as* another body, almost a quotation incarnated.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Elissa Marder, “The Mother Tongue in Phèdre and Frankenstein,” *Yale French Studies*, No. 76, *Autour de Racine: Studies in Intertextuality*. (1989), pp. 59-77.

<sup>58</sup> Brigitte Salino, *Bernard-Marie Koltès*, Stock, 2009, p. 19, hereafter referred to as Salino.

<sup>59</sup> Citationality makes it possible to trace back the genealogy of the ‘beast’ through its inscription on the proper name being signed by the mother: the divine, Christian, holy mother. Koltès’ biographer notes that all three boys of whom Bernard-Marie was the youngest bore the mark of the feminine, both divine and immaculate, inscribed on their *names*: « Après deux fils, le père aurait aimé une fille. La mère aussi, mais pour faire plaisir à son mari. Au fond, elle est heureuse – elle le sera toujours et ne s’en cachera jamais – avec ses trois garçons qui portent le nom de Marie, en hommage à la Vierge » [Salino p.18]. The oldest brothers bear the names Jean-Marie and François Marie Stéphane. Accordingly, the proper name is *signed* by the mother, thus turned into a quotation, participating in a truly *feminine* writing. This approach to the proper name also indicates a truly *theatrical* practice in Koltès’ work: the S/Z alteration, for instance, from Roberto Succo into the title of his last play *Roberto Zucco* (a “heroic” character who murders his parents, an innocent child and a police officer) establishes the play as a

In identifying himself with the *beast*, Koltès acknowledges at the same time that he remains a detached *prolongation* of the maternal body. In fact, that logic has allowed for one of the most notorious aspects of the “Koltèsian myth”: that which he himself admittedly describes as a pre-lingual and uncanny connection, or *communion*, with his mother. The *Lettres* and his recent biography have certainly reinforced this aspect of his mythology. In a now famous letter from July 18<sup>th</sup> 1969, addressed to his mother, the teenager Bernard-Marie became increasingly aware of that deep connection with his mother, while serving as a monitor in a summer camp and supervising young children in a trip to Canada. On that occasion, he discovered his own “maternal” side, leading to affirm, once and for all, a direct and explicit identification between him and his mother:

« Je suis encore sous le choc d’une impression étrange, subtile et fugitive que j’ai eu tout à l’heure, en consolant un petit garçon, Gilles. Je t’ai vue, je t’ai sentie pour ainsi dire; tu étais à ma place, tu étais moi, et j’étais ce petit garçon pleurant dans tes bras. [...] Peut-être sera-ce le seul instant de ma vie où je t’aurai comprise, mais pour ce seul instant, je sais que je ne pourrais jamais te manquer d’affection, les apparences fussent-elles fort trompeuses. [...] Rappelle-toi que tu seras toujours pour moi mon seul grand amour pur et véritable ».<sup>60</sup> This powerful and quite exceptional identification – which later Koltès will call “Christian love” – between the child and the mother, and famously lasting until the end of his life, establishes Koltès, in adulthood, as a cut-out prolongation of the maternal body, and his writing, as a citation of her inarticulate maternal tongue. More importantly, the above quotation introduces an aspect of Koltès and of his writing to

---

quotation of something yet more inarticulate, more originary than a dramatic depiction of a squalid “fait divers.”

<sup>60</sup> ‘Lettre à sa mère du 18 Juillet 1965,’ in *Lettres*, op. cit., p. 35, hereafter referred to as *Lettres*.

which we will come back shortly: a state of pre-linguistic *narcissism* constantly threatening articulation. For now, let us simply note that this state of *communion* with the mother, as Koltès describes it in this letter, echoes strangely and almost word per word Freud's analytical depiction of the stage he calls "primary narcissism."<sup>61</sup>

*The Mother Tongue is a Foreign Language*

Je trouve que le rapport que peut avoir un homme avec une langue étrangère – tandis qu'il garde au fond de lui une langue "maternelle" que personne ne comprend – est un des plus beaux rapports qu'on puisse établir avec le langage; et

---

<sup>61</sup> It is simply impossible not to identify the Koltèsian figure to that of Narcissus. In fact, the Freudian definition of the narcissistic identification between child and mother, on the 'primary' level, echoes almost word per word the above quotation from Koltès' letter to Germaine: "The child's love for his mother cannot continue to develop consciously any further; it succumbs to repression. The boy represses his love for his mother: he puts himself in her place, identifies himself with her, and takes his own person as a model in whose likeness he chooses the new objects of his love. In this way he has become a homosexual. What he has in fact done is to slip back to auto-erotism: for the boys whom he now loves as he grows up are after all only substitutive figures and revivals of himself in childhood—boys whom he loves in the way in which his mother loved *him* when he was a child. He finds the objects of his love along the path of *narcissism*, as we say; for Narcissus, according to the Greek legend, was a youth who preferred his own reflection to everything else and who was changed into the lovely flower of that name." Sigmund Freud, (1910). "Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XI* (1910): Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works, p. 99.



c'est peut-être aussi celui qui ressemble le plus au rapport de l'écrivain avec les mots.<sup>62</sup>

The Koltèsian text is built upon an estrangement of common language contaminated by a singular and inarticulate “mother tongue.” The absolute singularity of that tongue – Koltès will later describe it as an extreme state of “affective solitude” – stands opposite to communicative language. In that sense, theatrical writing feeds on the writer’s solitude in forcing him to distance himself – quite literally – from his native language, to re-discover “sa langue”: « J’écris différemment, par exemple, à New York qu’à Paris. On prend une espèce de plaisir parce qu’on est seul. C’est une langue qu’on ne parle pas un ou deux mois. L’écrire à côté, c’est étrange. On a l’impression de retrouver sa langue. De la retrouver, autrement. »<sup>63</sup> If Koltès always writes from the *wrong angle* – “à côté” – it is not at all because his native French is altered by another language, say American English. In places where he finds a state of absolute solitude, a contamination occurs between his native language and the *other* of language: the inarticulate tongue. In the Koltèsian practice of writing, the language of the playwright does not subscribe to any oppositional structure, but navigates between those two poles mentioned earlier. Theatrical writing, for Koltès, subscribes to the process of making language become foreign/estranged (*étrangère*). Strangely enough, that metamorphosis occurs in the form of a monological quotation, somewhere in between communicative language on the one hand and the “incomprehensible mother tongue” on the other.

---

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Alain Prique, *Théâtre Heute*, 3<sup>e</sup> trimestre 1983, reprinted in *PV*, p. 44 [reviewed by Koltès].

<sup>63</sup> Interview with François Malbosc, *Bleu-Sud*, mars-avril 1987, reprinted in *PV*, p. 77.

As a result, we may now safely say that, while allowing for theater to transform itself from outside its dramatic framework, Koltès' monological citations subscribe in fact to a polyphonic structure. That polyphonic structure combines and confronts articulate speech to the silent maternal tongue. These monologues are textual remainders of the confrontation between two different voices that, in effect, remain incompatible. Yet, in this Koltèsian topography, this infinite distance allows for a form of communication *before* communicative speech occurs, so that those voices « parlent des langues étrangères et se comprennent tout de même. »<sup>64</sup> They are in effect incompatible with one another, yet still bear witness, through their inability to compromise and make a “deal,” to a pre-linguistic state where identification and comprehension seem to be almost immanent. The Koltèsian monologue builds itself upon a multiplicity of voices and addresses. Interview with Véronique Hotte : « De toute façon, une personne ne parle jamais complètement seule : la langue existe pour et à cause de cela – on parle à quelqu'un, même quand on est seul. Il est évident aussi qu'à partir du moment où on formule, il se passe quelque chose. [...] ; “ça” dit beaucoup de choses encore une fois, surtout quand “ça” ne les dit pas »<sup>65</sup>. The Koltèsian monologue partakes in a dialogical exchange with an absent *other*. That dialogue occurs not with another dramatic voice, but with the undisclosed voice that fails to become intelligible. While quoting the silent maternal tongue, theatrical writing succeeds in articulating in so many words the very failure to speak communicatively, yet institutes through that failure – in the Koltèsian topography – a form of a pre-linguistic and non-conscious address. Because on the level

---

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Michael Merschmeier, *Théâtre Heute*, 3<sup>e</sup> trimestre 1983, reprinted in *PV*, p. 36 [translated from German by Patrice Perrot].

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Véronique Hotte, *Théâtre Public*, novembre-décembre 1988, reprinted in *PV*, p. 132.

of intelligibility the addressee remains unreachable, unidentifiable, even unspeakable, the speaker similarly reveals himself – for being a detached prolongation of the foreclosed maternal body – as indefinable and unnamable.

The monological sentence is built into layers of polyphonic voices, but gives the illusion of wholeness, through a well-circumscribed image of the speaking “self.” Yet, it also echoes in so many fragmented voices the event of the original cleavage from the inarticulate maternal body. In reading Claire Nouvet’s depiction of the structure of enunciation in the myth of Narcissus, we find that Koltès’ monological quotation suffers from a truly narcissistic address:

Sous l’échange entre Narcisse et Echo, sous le dialogue qui a lieu entre un « moi » et un « autre », le texte laisse apparaître l’autre scène à laquelle ce dialogue fait écran : le « moi » est contraint d’entendre l’écho qui hante sa voix dès qu’elle se met à parler. Cet écho n’affecte pas l’énoncé après coup ; il l’entame dès son émission. L’écho audible que nous entendons « après » que la phrase a été prononcée signale l’écho inaudible qui l’affecte et l’altère dans le présent même de son énonciation. Dès qu’elle parle, la langue fait écho. Elle explose en une multiplicité de sens incontrôlables qui s’accouplent et s’entremêlent les uns aux autres aux hasards des rencontres. Les échos de cette langue (qui le parle plus qu’il ne la parle) interdisent que le « je » puissent jamais simplement s’entendre parler.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Claire Nouvet, *Enfances Narcisse*, Galilée, Paris : 2009, pp. 38-39, hereafter referred to as Nouvet.

The Narcissistic monologue establishes the *audible* voice of the speaker as the echo of the *inaudible* event of its origin. It is a *quotation*: Echo reproduces Narcissus' words addressed to himself; but through that repetition she *curbs* their meanings introducing in this self-addressed speech – through a series of ellipses, misquotation and circumvolutions – an irreducible *alterity* that remains, in itself, unspeakable. The narcissistic address is inhabited by another voice that duplicates it and alters its meaning at once – “*alternae imagine vocis*;” but as Nouvet notes, this audible echo bears witness to this other *mute* echo, one that splits the monological voice in multiple layers. As we will see in respect to Koltès' sentence, Nouvet argues that the Narcissistic sentence carries from the start, from the event of its enunciation, the trace of the undisclosed *other*, with whom it has always already engaged in a dialogical exchange.

### **The Mirror Behind My Back: a Return to Narcissus**

#### *The Hollow Sentence*

« ... j'ai couru derrière toi dès que je t'ai vu tourner le coin de la rue, malgré tous les cons qu'il y a dans la rue, dans les cafés, dans les sous-sols de café, ici, partout, malgré la pluie et les fringues mouillées, j'ai couru, pas seulement pour la chambre, pas seulement pour la partie de nuit pour laquelle je cherche une chambre, mais j'ai couru, couru, couru, pour que cette fois, tourné le coin, je ne me trouve pas dans une rue vide de toi, pour que cette fois je ne retrouve pas seulement la pluie, la pluie, la pluie, pour que cette fois je te retrouve toi, de l'autre côté du coin, et que j'ose

crier: camarade!, que j'ose prendre ton bras : camarade!, que j'ose  
 t'aborder: camarade, donne-moi du feu, ce qui ne te coûtera  
 rien... » [la Nuit 12].

The monologue of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* seemingly presents itself in the form of a conventional address, a demand or a call from a *je* to an informal *tu*. It is primarily a series of requests, all of which remain ungranted, that consists not merely in asking a stranger in the street for some money, a cup of coffee, a beer, or a room for the night; in its most basic manifestation, this monologue is before all a call to speak out – *une demande de parole* –, so that « [je puisse] dire ce que j'ai à dire » : it is an apostrophe, but whose addressor and addressee remain ultimately unnamed. The event of this « grande phrase » occurs prior to any clear recognition of the speaker and the listener's identities. At this most elementary level of speech, the separation between the *je* and the *tu* is hardly taken for granted and, on a structural level, we find the genesis of the sentence to occur before such a separation. This particular form of enunciation, one that comes close to Jean-François Lyotard's "affect-phrase", forces language to retreat back toward a pre-articulate state, one of "primary narcissism," that tacitly interrupts the articulate sentence.<sup>67</sup> In this form of speech, "I" no longer speaks to "you" to mean

---

<sup>67</sup> Lyotard calls the affect-phrase inarticulate as it defies the "universe" of an articulate sentence: it is dictated by no addressor and directed to no addressee, and refers to nothing other than its own enunciation: « Une phrase peut être plus ou moins articulée, ses polarisations plus ou moins marquées. Mais la phrase-affect n'admettrait pas ces gradations. *Inarticulée* signifierait : cette phrase ne présente pas un univers de phrase ; elle signale du sens ; ce sens est d'une seule sorte, plaisir et/ou peine (« ça va, ça ne va pas ») ; ce sens n'est rapporté à aucun référent : le « ça va » et le « ça ne va pas » ne sont pas plus des attribues d'objets que le beau et le laid ; enfin ce sens n'émane d'aucun destinateur (je) et ne s'adresse à aucun destinataire (tu). » Jean François Lyotard, « la

“something” about an outside “referent.” This overflowing speech, a state of non-mastery and disembodied enunciation, belongs indeed to what we identify as the narcissistic category. As Nouvet puts it in respect to Narcissus’ speech:

Narcisse offre le spectacle pour le moins déroutant, terrifiant même, d’un sujet qui ne parvient pas à prendre conscience de lui-même en s’entendant parler. La parole n’assure ici aucune proximité et présence à soi. Elle ne permet pas, comme elle le devrait, de gagner une conscience de soit même. « Je » parle, mais cette parole ne

---

phrase-affect », in *Misère de la philosophie*, Galilée, 2000, p. 47, hereafter referred to as Phrase-Affect. Provided, as we argue here, that the sentence of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* challenges any clear separation between the speaking *je* and the unidentifiable *tu*, also that its referent presents itself as quite literally a *void*, we find that the sentence is primarily driven by what Lyotard identifies as *phôné*: a pre-linguistic voice, the Artaudian cry, that is, toward the state of ‘primary narcissism’ which belongs to *infantia*: « Ce temps d’avant le *logos* s’appelle *infantia*. Il est celui du *phôné* qui ne signifie que des affections, des *pathèmata*, des plaisirs et des peines de maintenant, sans les rapporter à un objet pris pour référent ni à un couple destinataire-destinataire. Plaisir et douleur se signalent par vocalisations [...] à l’occasion d’objets qui ne sont pas conçus, sous le régime d’un « narcissisme » antérieur à tout *ego*. C’est ce que Freud a décrit au double titre de la perversité polymorphe et du narcissisme primaire » [Phrase-Affect 53]. We will find that this condition Freud calls ‘polymorphous perversity,’ which he also says originates from infantile sexuality, causes both the speaker and the listener of the sentence to possess no stable identity and suffer from endless substitutions. More importantly, the affect-phrase (*phôné*), which Lyotard is so insistent on dissociating from the articulate sentence (*logos*), presents itself as being subject to the condition of *pneuma*, of *le souffle* (both breath and whisper) as we have defined it, and whose mechanism we will flesh out as the origin of Koltès’ writing. The *phôné* is here responsible for what we will call in this chapter a pre-linguistic ‘exchange of breath,’ which Lyotard identifies at this moment as a mutic and affective communication: « Cette communication sentimentale[,] [o]n peut la dire *muette* si l’on se souvient que la racine *mu* connote les lèvres fermées pour signaler qu’on se tait ou pour émettre un son *sourd*. De cette racine précédent *murmurer*, *mugir*, *mystère* et le bas latin *muttum* qui a donné en français le *mot*. La communication mutique est faite d’inspiration et d’expirations d’air non discrète : grognements, halètements, soupirs. » [Phrase-Affect 51]. To the extent that the sentence of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* does not entirely belong to the order of a wordless cry (or « grognements, halètements, soupirs »), and also does not participate in a clear cut separation between the addressor and the addressee, pointing to no external referent, we may simply state that Koltès’ sentence stands somewhere in-between Lyotard’s categorical differentiation between *logos* and *phôné*.

« me » revient pas. Elle ne m'offre pas le miroir dans lequel je peux me reconnaître et me donner ainsi la conscience de « moi même ». [Nouvet 33-34]

An excess of words in a disjointed syntax fails to elevate speech to the level of discourse.<sup>68</sup> The address of « la grande phrase » in *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* relies in fact on a pre-originary condition of a linguistic *void* - « pour que cette fois, tourné le coin, je ne me trouve pas dans une rue vide de toi. » This pre-existing condition summons the sentence to emerge, and the anonymous interlocutor to appear, both as substitutes to the *void*. The necessity of the call comes from a fundamental lack, that is, the absence of a proper address and of the identities of the addressor or the addressee. Participating in an endless and mute call, the *void* - « le coin de la rue » - becomes the locus from where the sentence erupts, along with its polymorphous interlocutor, the stranger turning the street corner, under the rain. « L'ivresse de la grande phrase » falls then into a whirlpool of multi-layered addresses, suggesting that the sentence never succeeds in filling entirely the pre-existing *void* of its address. « ...je n'arrive pas à dire ce que je dois te dire... » [La Nuit 47] : this often repeated confession causes the sentence to feed on its own inability to become meaningful, thus continuing to expand, in a failed attempt to explain itself

---

<sup>68</sup> We will later find that this utterly 'dysfunctional' use of language binds together the functions of 'theater' and that of the 'mother,' in that, as Koltès defines them, they are both completely '*inutile*': *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* : « ...regarde l'inutilité de ta mère : elle te donne un système nerveux, et puis après te lâche, à n'importe quel carrefour, sous une saloperie de pluie... » Bernard-Marie Koltès, *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, Minuit, 1988 (written in 1977), p. 18, hereafter referred to as *La Nuit*. Interview with Michel Genson : « Ce qui me plaît dans mon métier, c'est la gratuité. Faire du théâtre est la chose la plus superficielle, la plus inutile au monde, et, du coup on a envie de la faire à la perfection. » Interview with Michel Genson, *Le Republicain Lorrain*, 27 octobre 1988, reprinted in *PV* p. 119 [reviewed by Koltès].

further, ad infinitum. This overflow suggests that the sentence's unique yet ever escaping referent may in fact be no other than the *void* itself.

The relationship of the speaker to its anonymous interlocutor(s) clearly lies on a condition of volatility, of endless substitutions and projections, structurally similar to a child's sexually driven substitutions of its phantasmal object, through what Freud coined as the child's "polymorphous perversity":<sup>69</sup> « ... [le vent] m'aurait emporté tant je deviens léger, comme les courants d'air te faisaient disparaître au coin des rues, lorsque je t'ai aperçu, une fois, deux fois, trois fois, voyant bien de loin que tu étais encore un enfant, alors j'ai tout lâché, le vent m'a soulevé, et j'ai couru, sentant à peine si je touchais le sol, aussi vite que toi, sans obstacle cette fois, pour enfin t'aborder ... » [La Nuit 33]. This intangible lightness describes the defining attribute of both the speaker and the interlocutor: an utter lack of firm identity, both are figures of spectrality. Importantly, Koltès associates this attribute to the pre-lingual and mute condition of the *infans*: « car

---

<sup>69</sup> As mentioned in an earlier footnote, what Freud calls 'polymorphous perversity' belongs to the state of 'primary narcissism' of the pre-lingual infant. Freud's elaboration of infantile sexuality blames the later perversities of adulthood on the failure to repress those impulses, which, as he develops in his essay 'A Child is Being Beaten,' is also at the origin of the development of sexual fantasies providing the power to substitute the roles of the characters in those fantasies almost indiscriminately. More directly related with our reading of Koltès is Freud's association of 'homosexuality' (i.e. sexually directed to one's own double image, or to the '*frère*' as we will define it later) and of 'incest' in the child's propensity toward 'polymorphous perversity': "they attach no special importance to the distinction between the sexes, both; they direct their first sexual lusts and their curiosity to those who are nearest and for other reasons dearest to them—parents, brothers and sisters, or nurses; and finally, they show (what later on breaks through once again at the climax of a love-relation) that they expect to derive pleasure not only from their sexual organs, but that many other parts of the body lay claim to the same sensitivity, afford them analogous feelings of pleasure and can accordingly play the part of genitals. Children may thus be described as 'polymorphously perverse.'" Freud, S. (1916). Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XV (1915-1916): Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis (Parts I and II)*, p. 209.



j'ai bien vu, de loin, que tu étais un enfant » [La Nuit 28]. The multi-layered and polymorphous identity of the mute listener – *l'enfant* – inscribes itself in the circular structure of the sentence. The sentence never stops reminiscing about its previous locutions; and these tireless ruminations and repetitions also forecast a never-ending re-invention of the sentence's multiple addresses to come: to the blonde woman, the prostitutes, the guy in the street, the infant, and more importantly, we will come back to her, the mysterious girl on the bridge called "Mama."

### *Fractured mirrors*

On the visual level, the linguistic *void*, at the origin of the elocution, allows for the advent of the *double*. We may note that in *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, a transposition of that *void* takes place from the structure of enunciation to that of visual representation. The fracture in the construction of speech translates in a fracture in the construction of the gaze. Similarly, the "unpower" (*impouvoir*) of Koltès' theatrical writing now transposes itself onto the visual apparatus of the theatrical stage. *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* institutes the Narcissistic gaze of Koltesian theater as emptied-out, its vision revolving around a blind spot, from where arises – as though from the exterior, foreclosed – the fantasy, idealized figure of the other, an *infans* embodied: « ... je ne voudrais pas regarder dans mon dos le miroir alors que toi, la pluie ne t'a même pas mouillé, la pluie a passé à côté de toi, les heures passent à côté de toi, c'est là que j'ai eu raison de comprendre que, toi tu n'es qu'un enfant, tout te passe à côté, rien ne bouge... » [La Nuit 56] The speaker of *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* opens his monologue by

confessing an aversion to mirrors, which present to him an image he very much desires to forget. He runs away from mirrors, turning scrupulously his back to them.<sup>70</sup> This spatial setting – the speaker facing the listener, turning his back to the mirrors – establishes the conditions for the apparition of the other’s image; but that spatial setting also describes in itself a mirror structure. The mirrors themselves are placed behind the speaker; the speaker faces a deserted street corner from which *void* appears the image of the silent listener; the listener, in turn, faces both the speaker and the mirrors standing behind the speaker’s back (« ... il faut [les] mettre derrière soi maintenant qu'on est là, où c'est toi qu'ils regardent... » [Nuit 8]). The figure of the listener therefore appears at the very spot of an *absent* mirror: the listener reproduces the image of the speaker, but only as its *negative*: the listener remains spotless, “untouched” by the rain and by the hours – Koltès associates this state of absolute immunity to the condition of the *infans* – whereas « je ne veux pas me regarder, il faudrait que je me sèche, retourner là en bas me remettre en état - les cheveux tout au moins pour ne pas être malade ... » [Nuit 7]. The decrepit image of the speaker contrasts with the idealized image of the listener who appears, literally, as a *cliché*, a negative print of a motionless, unchanging photography: « ... j'évite les miroirs et je n'arrête pas de te regarder, toi qui ne changes pas... » [La Nuit 56]. The listener of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* irrupts from the *void* as the unchanging *imago* of the speaker, and his idealized, sublime and statuesque reflection: as Jacques Lacan puts it

---

<sup>70</sup> « ... si l'on ose demander, malgré les fringues et les cheveux mouillés, malgré la pluie qui ôte les moyens si je me regarde dans une glace - mais, même si on ne le veut pas, il est difficile de ne pas se regarder, tant par ici il y a de miroirs, dans les cafés, les hôtels, qu'il faut mettre derrière soi, comme maintenant qu'on est là, où c'est toi qu'ils regardent, moi, je les mets dans le dos, toujours, même chez moi, et pourtant c'en est plein, comme partout ici, jusque dans les hôtels cent mille glaces vous regardent, dont il faut se garder ... » [la Nuit 8].

regarding the passage of the infant through the mirror stage, this identification is truly a *méconnaissance*, an inversed and idealized sublimation of a chaotic body.

Facing both the speaker and the mirrors at the speaker's back, the listener's image appears not just as the negative projection of the speaker, but as the inversed *image of the image* of the speaker reflected in the mirrors at his back. The timeless photographic apparition of the listener, both spectral and statuesque, signals in effect what Nouvet calls, in her reading of Ovide, a state of *petrification* – flesh turned mineral – of Narcissus gazing at his mirror image, in the fountain.

La chair de Narcisse se fait minérale, aussi minérale que la statue qu'il voit flotter sur l'eau. Et ce n'est pas la seule allusion à la pétrification. Narcisse, avant de mourir, frappe sa poitrine nue « de ses mains blanches comme le marbre ». Narcisse, que le miroir a gelé sur place, imite la belle statue qu'il absorbe. Il se forme à l'image d'une image inanimée. Il devient la ressemblance d'une ressemblance, une « *imagineis umbra* ». « *imagineis umbra* », cette expression que le narrateur applique à l'image que Narcisse découvre dans le miroir de la fontaine, signifie « le reflet de ton image ». Dire qu'une image est le reflet d'une image peut sembler tautologique. Le génitif autorise cependant une autre interprétation. L'*imago* dans le miroir est le reflet d'une image, à savoir le reflet de cette image qu'est Narcisse « lui même ». L'*umbra* n'est pas le reflet de Narcisse. Elle reflète l'*imago* que Narcisse est devenu. [Nouvet 102-103]

In her reading of Ovid and Lacan's essay on the mirror stage, Nouvet underscores a psychoanalytic debt to the Ovidian narrative of Narcissus: Analytic discourse institutes

the mirror image as “formative” of the infant, in that the infant takes part in the process of ego formation while gazing at the image depicting a well-defined, circumscribed body. Nouvet stresses that along with giving rise to the birth of the ego through an illusion of wholeness, the *imago* also impresses on the infant a state of *petrification* in the process of becoming a totality, a *cliché*, or a statue. A contamination occurs from the *imago* to the infant, who becomes in turn an *imago* itself.<sup>71</sup> A double-sided process of glorification and petrification, of becoming ideal and mineral – a dead corpse embalmed –, constitutes the two faces of the same mirror-image, in respect to the birth of the *I*.

We may expect the sentence of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* to acknowledge also this Ovidian complexity of the *imago*, more particularly in the oppositional relationship between the visual apparition of the *infans* at the place of the absent mirror, and the decrepit image of the speaker reflected in the mirrors behind his back: one negative reflection of an *imago* of another *imago*. In opposition to the supernatural apparition of the listener – the mute child, immune to misery and to articulation – the true image of the speaker in the mirrors is one of illness, of strangeness, of desperation, and tainted by

---

<sup>71</sup> Nouvet continues : « Ovide, avant Lacan, met en scène le « rôle formatif » de l’*imago* que Lacan fait passer au premier plan dans sa propre version du stade du miroir, une version qui signale sa dette ovidienne dans la référence que Lacan fait aux connotations latines du terme « *imago* » et, tout particulièrement, dans son insistance à marquer une correspondance entre « statue », « fantôme » et « *imago* ». [...] Lacan épelle ce qu’Ovide signale dans l’étrange pétrification qu’il inflige à Narcisse. L’*imago* n’est pas un simple reflet. Elle est active puisqu’elle exerce sur le sujet et son corps une puissance effectivement « formative ». L’image, une fois absorbée et incorporée, informe le corps et l’*égo* qui essaient de se conformer à l’unité, la totalité, et la stabilité qu’elle promet et illustre à la fois. Le miroir est la scène d’une naissance fabuleuse où l’*imago* fait fonction de « matrice » : elle engendre un *égo* qui se forme par identification, c’est à dire en se conformant à l’*imago* » [Nouvet 103]. It will soon become clear that the *imago* presented in the place of the absent mirror, in *la Nuit juste avant les forêts*, functions indeed as a ‘matrix’ in respect to the speaker, to the writer, and to Koltès himself, as far as it occurs, quite literally, in the *place* of the absent mother figure: the spectral interlocutor that is both ‘Mama’ and Germaine.

suicidal thoughts. That image is one the speaker desires to forget, one that makes him turn “*cinglé*,” because it is intolerable, it goes “*trop loin*,” as of someone who desires death, yet feels frightened and parallelized in front of it. The mirror image of the speaker of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts*, quite detached from the projected picture of the glorified listener, depicts the bitter side of Narcissus’ *imago* in the mirror, one that is not beautiful, but rather decrepit and intolerable. His image in the mirror is truly deadly and a form of *petrification*: it is explicitly so when the speaker compares himself – and his propensity to turn “*cinglé*” – to the image of a prostitute who killed herself by ways of eating, quite literally, the earth from the cemetery:<sup>72</sup>

... cela me sape le moral le nombre qui en mourrait si c'était plus facile, le nombre qui irait loin s'il y avait la manière, si on n'avait pas peur de la manière, qu'on ne soit jamais sûr d'y passer, ça peut durer longtemps, et que le jour où l'on aurait inventé une sacrée manière douce, et donnée à tout le monde, ce serait le massacre pour des histoires comme cette femme-là qui y est bien passée d'avoir

---

<sup>72</sup> We may identify this unusual yet recurrent motif of *eating earth* as an index of the intrinsically narcissistic structure behind theatrical writing, as we describe it here through Beckett, Koltès and Novarina. This obsessive motif may indicate these playwright’s acute awareness of their own writing as build upon the structure of a narcissistic speech, in the Ovidian sense, which causes writing to become inarticulate in their own singular ways. Valère Novarina, in an interview from 2002: « Le théâtre est une leçon de pensée dans l’espace, une leçon d’incarnation, de matérialisme et d’humilité : il nous aide à ne pas oublier complètement le goût de la terre dans notre bouche lorsque nous parlons. » Valère Novarina, « L’homme hors de lui », in *Europe, revue littéraire mensuelle*, N°880-881/Août-Septembre 2002, p.173. Also echoing the petrifying dimension of speech in *la Nuit juste avant les forêts*, Beckett’s *Dis Joe* (partially analyzed in the previous chapter) relates, as a possible cause for its fragmented (inner) speech, a similar figure of a woman dead after repeatedly trying to bury her own face into a stony ground, by the water: « ...S’allonge à la fin le visage à un mètre de l’eau... Cette fois elle a pensée à tout... Avale les derniers [comprimés] ...Ça c’était de l’amour... Creuse un petit lit pour son visage dans les pierre [...] Maintenant imagine... *Imagine*... Le visage dans les pierres... Les lèvres sur une pierre... *Une pierre*... Joe à bord... La grève dans l’ombre... *Joe Joe*... Aucun son... Pour les pierres... Les pierres... » [Dis Joe 91-92].

avalé de la terre, elle va dans le cimetière, elle creuse à côté des tombes, elle prend de la terre dans ses mains, la terre la plus profonde, et l'avale - ces histoires-là, si on s'écoute, si on se laisse aller, cela vous rend cinglé -, parce que la terre des cimetières, celle qui touche les cercueils : toi qui refroidis les morts, toi qui as la sacrée habitude de tout rendre bien froid jusque tout au fond et sans qu'on y revienne, refroidis une bonne fois la cinglée que je suis!... [Nuit 37-38]

The speaker's own address in the text duplicates that of the prostitute talking to the cold earth, via the pronoun "tu." This address to the dead – to petrified corpses, turned into earth – subscribes to the structure of the narcissistic sentence, recalling Koltès's even more explicit declaration, in *Sallinger*, in the same year as *la Nuit juste avant les forêts*: « Je parle aux absents, je me déclare aux morts. »<sup>73</sup> The prostitute's wish to turn "refroidie," into a corpse by ways of eating the earth of the cemetery, certainly presents itself as a gesture of *petrification*: the infant's desire to be glorified in an ideal ego, embodying a timeless, statuesque *imago*, via eating the other-dead-turned-mineral. An act of cannibalism turns into self-cannibalism, as Narcissus falls into the water, effectively drinking his own image. This already forecasts the possibility of an incestuous relationship between mother and son, that we will soon discuss, on which structure relies Koltès' entire interaction with the *other*. Heirs of Rousseau and Levi-Strauss, we know the prohibition of this particular category to stand at the structural threshold of what allows for the social order; what we discover with the narcissistic sentence is that it also stands on the boundary separating the mute *infans* and the speaking ego.

---

<sup>73</sup> *Sallinger*, Minuit, 1998, (written in 1977) p. 59.

Koltès' twist on the narcissistic sentence, paralleled with the analytic process of ego formation, clearly lays out the two functionally opposite dimensions of the *imago*, the two sides of a same mirror-image. The condition allowing for the ego's birth also requires a form of death, that of the *infans*.<sup>74</sup> We may note, however, that if Koltès' theater calls for a return to the *infans* by means of writing, it does so not by rejecting language as a whole, but by rendering it, as he later states, *useless*. In other words, without the previous crossing into the field of language (and a separation from the maternal body), the desire to return back to the state of *infantia* could never occur. Contrary to Ovid, Koltès' take on the narcissistic gaze may thus be reversing the structural chronology of the apparition of the *imago*. In fact, the myth of Narcissus situates the origin of the *imago* in the gaze of the symbolic other: a true social construct. As a point of fact, Narcissus falls in love with his own image because it is a projection, no matter how deprived of self-consciousness, of the others' unwavering admiration for his beauty.<sup>75</sup> As Claire Nouvet puts it:

« Narcisse qui voit là-bas, dans le miroir, la belle image que son corps offre au regard de l'autre, se met à désirer ce corps comme tant d'autres, Echo par exemple, l'ont désiré avant lui. Il désire ce qui provoqua le désir des autres, à savoir l'image qu'est le corps, cette anatomie imaginaire qui le forme et l'informe, et qui dénie la corruptibilité et la mutabilité de la chair. » [Nouvet 188]

---

<sup>74</sup> In respect to *infancy* as a permanent state whose continuous and necessary killing is presented as a precondition for the functionality of the speaking ego, cf. Leclair, Serge. *On tue un enfant*, Seuil, Paris, 1981.

<sup>75</sup> "Narcissus now had reached his sixteenth year./And seemed both man and boy;/And many a youth and many a girl desired him, but hard pride/ Ruled in that delicate frame, and never a youth/And never a girl could touch his haughty heart." Ovid, "Narcissus and Echo," in *Metamorphosis*, trans. A.D. Melville, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1986, p.61.

Following this rational, the mirror image standing at the back of the speaker of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* reveals to be exactly the opposite of the image of Narcissus. The speaker's image remains intolerable to him, it is one he repudiates, that of an *étranger*. He repudiates the mirrors all around him, « parce que je suis comme cela, je n'aime pas ce qui vous rappelle que vous êtes étranger, pourtant, je le suis un peu, c'est certainement visible, je ne suis pas tout à fait d'ici » [Nuit 10]. The speaker is reminded of his being *étranger* among the French, most especially in the public lavatory, by the distinctive feature of not being circumcised:<sup>76</sup> « ... c'était bien visible, en tout cas, avec les cons d'en bas attroupés dans mon dos, après avoir pissé, lorsque je me lavais le zizi, - à croire qu'ils sont tous aussi cons, les Français, incapables d'imaginer, parce qu'ils n'ont jamais vu qu'on se lave le zizi, alors que pour nous, c'est une ancienne habitude, mon père me l'a appris ... » [Nuit 11]. “*Les Français,*” “*les loubards,*” “*les cons d'en bas,*” « les ministères, les flics, l'armée, les patrons », the speaker is reminded from all sides, at all time, that he is a misfit, that he does not belong to the social order [Nuit 19-20]. The refusal to take part in the social system and be functionally active in the working force translates in the following repeated statement: « travailler en usine, moi, jamais! » [Nuit 14]. Unlike the symbolically constructed *imago* of Narcissus in the water, the symbolic

---

<sup>76</sup> Along with incest and cannibalism, the uncircumcised phallus is also a prohibited figure posing a threat to both the socio-cultural order and linguistic articulation. There is a textual echo and a structural juxtaposition between Koltès' statement in *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* and that of Jacques Derrida in *Circonfessions*, to which we will return in the last chapter: « le Juif non-circoncis est condamné à la géhenne », Jacques Derrida, « Circonfession », in Geoffrey Bennington et Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida, Seuil*, « Les Contemporains », 1991, p. 227, hereafter referred to as *Circonfessions*.



construction of the speaker's *imago*, which he perceives in the mirrors around him, is exactly the opposite of being beautiful.

The speaker's seemingly rebellious discourse against national identity and social blending is in fact a childish outcry, one that is more of a paranoid discourse than an ideologically driven one. The inherited foreignness that the speaker reclaims from his father, associated with « mon zizi étranger » [Nuit 29], along with his inability to speak properly, feed into a paranoid and quite psychotic foreclosure of the entire world around him. This foreclosure is most clearly presented in a shift affecting the proposition « ... moi aussi je suis un petit peu étranger ... » into the more radical: « ... moi, seul, étranger contre tous ... » [Nuit 24]. The estranged image of the self from the symbolic realm establishes the speaker's *imago*, in opposition to that of Narcissus, as utterly intolerable, because it is constructed by the world around him. « ... ces cons de Français [...], groupés derrière ... » [Nuit 11]: in effect, the gaze of the French come from the same place as the mirrors he so desires to avoid, i.e. from behind his back.

The drunken sentence of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* therefore recedes back to the set conditions that constitute the birth of the ego, and also that of the speaking subject. The listener, the *infans*, appears at the place of the absent mirror and replicates the socially constructed *imago* of the mirrors: an *imago* of another *imago*, but an *inverted* version of it. The statuesque epiphany of the *enfant-roi* – providing the child with an ego at the time of the mirror stage – stands in opposite to (and also in front of) the more degrading mirror image of the homeless, drunken, and ill-looking foreigner, who fails to fit in the social order. The chronology for the emergence of these two opposites *imagos*, in respect to the process of ego formation, signals indeed an inverted temporality: in the

process of ego-formation, it proves to be a *recession* to infancy rather than an *ascension* toward becoming a social speaking-subject.<sup>77</sup> As Lacan mentions regarding the infant's own perception of the glorified *imago* of himself: « le point important est que cette forme situe l'instance du moi, dès avant sa détermination sociale, dans une lignée de fiction, à jamais irréductible pour le seul individu. »<sup>78</sup> In Lacan's 1949 narrative of the mirror stage, the ego opens the door for the child to the social and symbolic order, but the statuesque *imago* that he perceives in the mirror *precedes* that process of symbolic inscription. In Lacanian parlance, the *imago* irrupts from a breach in the symbolic chain, a pre-originary *void* that *precedes* and *interrupts* that chain – which Lacan later calls the “Real” – and belongs to the individual alone.<sup>79</sup>

Accordingly, the apparition of the glorified *infans* in the place of the adult – a sick, drunken homeless – suggests that Koltès' monologue subscribes to the *inverted* process of ego formation: it *recedes* from a socially and symbolically constructed image back to the individual construction of a glorified self, as a *double*. Koltès' theatrical writing finds a propensity to *recede back* to infancy, and confront language to a state of *infantia*, of muteness.

---

<sup>77</sup> The above-mentioned notion of ‘chronology’ in respect to ego formation does not, of course, presuppose a developmental spectrum. As Jacques Lacan later revised his own chronological narrative in respect to the mirror stage, we may similarly underline that the temporality we refer to concerns a structural elaboration of the ego formation rather than a developmental one.

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Lacan 'Le Stade du Miroir' (1949), in *Écrits* (Paris, 1966), p. 93.

<sup>79</sup> For the first occurrence of the notion of the ‘Real’ – as an originary *void* in the symbolic chain generative of the *imago* – see Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre VII: L'Éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*, (texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller), Paris: Seuil, 1986.

*Community of Brother*

The structural mutation from the estranged *imago* of a speaking subject to that of a mute and glorified *infans* discloses the complexity of the relationship with (and the constant re-invention of) the *other*, to whom speech is addressed. In the Koltèsian text, the relationship with the other is built on a symbolically infinite and unbridgeable gap, one that cleaves the self from its inverted and radically opposite double. Similarly, Koltès' notorious *self*-hatred – for being a white French male – and his fascination with minority groups, such as Blacks, Arabs, Native Americans, women, but also criminals, and the homeless, reflect the same narcissistic address whose inverted structure we have set forth in *la Nuit juste avant les forêts*. The writer's need to find himself in places where he is treated like a stranger, for instance among the Blacks of Harlem, the Indians of Guatemala, or the soldiers of Nicaragua, are extensively and even romantically recounted in his letters: « j'ai des grands moments de solitude (pas un mot de français depuis mon départ, sauf un soir, et cela fait des effets bizarres dans les pensées intérieures) » [*Lettres* 350]. Other excerpt from a letter in Guatemala, in 1978, one among so many relating the same experience: « je viens de découvrir que la chose qui m'attire dans les voyages, est que les gens parlent une langue étrangère, et qu'il te faut la parler ; [...] que le fait de devoir s'exprimer dans un idiome peu familier fait apparaître d'étranges phénomènes de la communication, et puis il y a cette chose aussi, qui n'est pas rien, que toute les bizarreries sont acceptées, partant du fait que ta présence même est la bizarrerie maximale » [*Lettres* 355].

The irrepressible desire to become *étranger* (both from the social and linguistic standpoints) triggers a return through writing back to a state prior to symbolic identification, and to Narcissus the *infans*. These displacements bring the Koltèsian figure to re-discover itself as its radical other, and his « pensées intérieures » to be contaminated by the uncanny “affective solitude” he ascribes to the maternal figure. Likewise, the speaker of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* acknowledges the listener, the *camarade*, as being another *étranger* (« nous autres, camarade, étrangers » [la Nuit 25-26, emphasis mine]). This uncanny, even structurally paradoxical use of the pronoun *nous*, instituting a community of *étrangers* and individuals dissimilar to one another in all respect, suggests an almost utopian vision, borrowing a term from Jean-Luc Nancy, of *une communauté désœuvrée*. The vision of such an impossible “non-communitarian community” presents itself as the cornerstone of Koltès’ theater. A particularly explicit manifestation is the encounter between the Black character, Alboury, and the white woman, Léone, in *Combat de nègre et de chiens*, taking place in Africa, in a construction field run entirely by highly discriminative White men. During this encounter, the two characters, both victims of the White male figures, speak “*étranger*” to one another, that is, in foreign tongues known only to each speaker, and yet they seem to understand each other despite the linguistic divide.

ALBOURY. -Walla niu noppi tè xoolan tè rek.

LÉONE. -Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind. (*Elle rit.* ) Moi aussi je parle étranger, vous voyez! On va finir par se comprendre, j'en suis sûre.

ALBOURY. -y ow dégguloo sama lakk waandé man dégg naa sa bos.

[*Combat de nègre et de chiens* 58]

Albourn and Léone find the ability to speak “*étranger*” to one another, as though it were in itself *another* language, but one that operates prior to all other languages, a language *beneath* all others, communicating without being reciprocally intelligible. Along the same line, the speaker of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* calls the stranger in the street “*camarade*,” a heavily connoted term in France in the second half of the century. He repeatedly asks his interlocutor to commit to his obscure idea of a « Syndicat International »: « un syndicat à l'échelle internationale - c'est très important, l'échelle internationale (je t'expliquerai, moi-même, c'est dur pour bien tout comprendre) » [Nuit 17]. The call for the creation of an international community, one that may resonate heavily in the communist context of the time, takes up an entirely new dimension in Koltès’ world, most importantly because the speaker repeatedly fails to explain what that “*syndicate*” actually signifies, precisely because it exceeds the boundaries of a conceivable and even intelligible concept.

This notion of community, in Koltès, is built entirely around a privileged and ambiguous word: “*le frère*.” Dear to Koltès, this word actively participates in the construction of his own mythology, for being used in abundance especially when addressed to a person of different color, ethnic origin or linguistic background. The term *fraternité*, no matter how heavily connoted especially in French culture, also acquires a singular, almost reversed signification when it comes to Koltès, describing a privileged yet utterly violent relationship with the radical *other*. As Koltès puts it in *Prologue*:

L’avantage provisoire du mot « frère » sur tout autre mot désignant ce qui lie quelqu’un à quelqu’un, c’est qu’il est dépourvu de toute sentimentalité, de toute

affectivité ; ou, en tous les cas, on peut facilement l'en débarrasser. Il peut être dur, agressif, fatal, presque dit avec regret. Et puis il suggère l'irréversibilité et le sang (pas le sang des rois, des familles ou des races, celui qui est tranquillement enfermé dans le corps et qui n'a pas plus de sens ni de couleur ni de prix que l'estomac ou la moelle épinière, mais qui sèche sur le trottoir).<sup>80</sup>

In Koltèsian parlance, “*frères*” denominates people whose defining features are utterly dissimilar to the speaker: in respect to culture, background, race, or gender. Yet despite those dissimilarities, it also implies notions of lineage and blood relations defined not through the blood inheritance and family filiation, but through a transmission from one generation to the next, and between siblings, of the propensity to *spill each other's blood*. In this category, as far as the blood filiation remains indestructible, any form of violence directed toward the *other* is acceptable, and even structurally necessary. One should also keep in mind that Bernard-Marie was the last of three boys, all of whose names were marked, reportedly, with the signature of the “Virgin Mother:” *Marie*. The notion of *frère* thus informs the relationship with the image of the double, as it arises in the mirror, infinitely different from the person who stands before it. The inherited violence directed toward the *frère* – we may recall here the threats made explicit by the speaker to his “*camarade*” listener –<sup>81</sup> all duplicate the structural relationship of the self to its other-self,

---

<sup>80</sup> Bernard-Marie Koltès, *Prologue*, Editions de Minuit, 1991, p. 121.

<sup>81</sup> «... [le Syndicat International] c'est pour notre défense, uniquement la défense, car c'est bien cela don't on a besoin, se défendre, non? tu penses peut-être: pas moi, pourtant, moi je te dis : peut-être que c'est moi qui t'ai abordé, que ce serait moi qui aurais besoin d'une chambre pour cette nuit (non, camarade, je n'ai pas dit que j'en avais besoin), que c'est moi qui ai demandé: camarade, donne-moi du feu, mais ce n'est pas toujours celui qui

split and reflected in the mirror as *another*, the *infans*. This double-sided relationship with the *frère*, mixed with both feelings of fear and fascination, becomes clear with Koltès' own projections on the killer Roberto Succo who inspired, along with details of his life and death, the last play, before Koltès' death, called *Roberto Zucco*. "A true hero," used to say Koltès in his interviews to all who dared to listen, of this man who killed a child, his own mother and father, and a police officer: « je trouve que c'est une trajectoire d'un héro antique absolument prodigieuse. »<sup>82</sup>

Koltès gives Succo the same mythical image as Samson, who like Succo was betrayed by a woman.<sup>83</sup> Koltès' fascination with him might seem to be at first caused by Succo's astoundingly rebellious and nearly impossible accomplishments, despite the lack of any material power. Making a joke of the authorities by escaping from prisons and courthouses, Succo may easily be assimilated to such popular anti-hero figures and notorious public enemies as Jacques Mesrine or John Dillinger. More importantly, Succo possessed an "adolescent" if not asexual beauty, which provoked Koltès' fascination with him. This identification is clearly of a narcissistic nature, as Koltès explains that Succo's powers are not the cause of the public's admiration for him: to the contrary, his powers are themselves consequences of the public gaze, which glorify him as the socially

---

aborde qui est le plus faible, et j'ai bien vu tout de suite que tu ne semblais pas bien fort...  
» [Nuit 15].

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Klaus Gronau and Sabine Seifert, *Die Tageszeitung*, 25 novembre 1988, reprinted in *PV*, p. 145.

<sup>83</sup> The intrinsic violence in respect to the 'brother' is directly inherited from the 'mother' figure. As we will see in more details, the notion of 'brother' – and the inherited violence that defines it – relies heavily and symptomatically on the relationship with the more unintelligible 'mother' figure. The structural connection between the 'brother' and a feminine 'betrayal' – leading both Succo and Samson to their deaths – will direct us to Koltès' own writing as being a byproduct of the separation from (and the 'betrayal' of) the figures of Mama and Germaine.

unacceptable « Je dirais que ce qui distingue un homme comme Samson du commun des mortels, ce n'est pas tant une quelconque mission, une quelconque tâche, c'est sa force extraordinaire et le regard admiratif que les autres posent sur lui; c'est cela qui fait de lui un héro. »<sup>84</sup> Koltès vigorously repeats in interviews that his aim was to resurrect Roberto Succo from his suicide in his prison cell, by turning the world's eyes back on him, through posters for the play *Roberto Zucco* put up on the street walls, and finally through the public's gaze turned to the stage. In brief, Zucco is nothing other than a mere *imago*.

We may find at this point a singular meaning in the fact that the Koltèsian gaze, elevating the dreaded *imago* of the *self* to the level of a glorified *other*, (narcissistic in the “primary” sense), relates closely to a process of mourning. Like the dead Succo transformed into a staged Zucco, like Narcissus petrified, and like the listener of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts*, the “brother” is structurally and necessarily a *dead figure*, who calls for an impossible work of mourning. Not coincidentally, Alboury opens *Combat de nègre et de chiens* by coming to retrieve the body of his dead brother, killed by the White construction workers: « Je viens réclamer le corps de mon frère que l'on nous a arraché, parce que son absence a brisé cette proximité qui nous permet de nous tenir chaud, parce que, même mort, nous avons besoin de sa chaleur pour nous réchauffer, et il a besoin de la nôtre pour lui garder la sienne. »<sup>85</sup> Impossible mourning, for the body has already been dispensed with. As we will see, in acknowledging the irremediable separation from the maternal body (« la proximité brisée »), the process of mourning necessitates theatrical writing.

---

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Matthias Matussek and Nikolaus Von Festenberg, *Der Spiegel*, october 24 1988, reprinted in *PV*, p. 110.

<sup>85</sup> Bernard-Marie Koltès, *Combat de nègre et de chien*, Minuit, 1989 (rédaction, 1979), p. 33.



« ... mama mama mama... »

The address of Koltès' theatrical writing builds upon a relationship of *fraternité* with the other, in the elliptic sense he ascribes to the term: an address to the dead. As mentioned earlier, this relationship subscribes to the structure of a narcissistic gaze redoubling the self as another, in ways that the self-addressed monologue (provided that there is, at this level, no true selfhood) appears now in the guise of a violent, confrontational dialogue, for instance, between the Dealer and the Client in *Dans la Solitude des champs de coton*. The apparition of the other emerges from a state of pre-existing *void* – along with the sentence itself, as discussed earlier – in the image of the *infans*. Yet this spectral figure, one that still subscribes to the realm of the *visible*, points to a more originary figure, one that remains completely absent from the gaze: “Mama,” this Other mysterious character of which the speaker of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* is so eager to speak, and who in the end transforms the address of the sentence into a cry for help, taking the place of the *infans*, the listener: « ... j'ai tant envie d'une chambre et je suis tout mouillé, mama mama mama, ne dis rien, ne bouge pas, je te regarde, je t'aime ... » [Nuit 63].

Who is Mama? The *void* that gives birth to the sentence of the speaker and stretches it indefinitely becomes an attribute of that *absent* figure, « la fille sur le pont. » Before engaging with the function of “Mama” in Koltès' text, and the event of her *naming* as both a quotation and a mutilation of “Maman,” let us now examine the particular function of the mother in respect to the narcissistic structures of the gaze and of speech. The “mother” acts here as a transparent canvas, a “receptacle” (*khora*) that makes

the *imago* and speech possible, yet remains “herself” invisible and unintelligible. The Ovidian text may again inform our reading of the relationship between narcissistic speech and the function of the mother. In her reading of Ovid, Nouvet stresses that Narcissus’ *imago* appears in the water, that is, quite literally in the place of his mother, Liriope. The image appears in her mineral flesh, because she is herself, naiad, a *spiritus* of the water : « Narcisse est l’enfant d’une naïade, et Liriope, qui figure ce qui n’est pas figurable : l’eau qui dissout formes et figures » [Nouvet 110]. Like the very surface of the mirror, the mother is the locus of representation, yet she escapes from any form of representation. She is the locus where the *imago* of the *infans* appears, a mute image. But her fluidity is also a threat to the durability of that *imago*, a constant reminder of the possibility of *dis*-figuration: « L’image de Narcisse s’imprime sur le fond d’une eau-mère immense, corps liquide qui déborde les limites spectaculaires de l’imago à laquelle il donne corps » [Nouvet 114]. Nouvet continues : « La mère fait double emploi. Elle est le miroir ovidien sous sa double modalité : à la fois l’eau qui donne corps à l’image et le miroir qui en réfléchit et délimite la forme. Elle est à la fois l’eau qui liquéfie le corps de l’enfant et le miroir qui le réfléchit. Elle le liquéfie et lui donne forme dans le même geste » [Nouvet 115]. The marble of the statuesque *imago* is truly made of water, a maternal substance. Accordingly, the mother *extends* herself in the image of the child, but at the same time exceeds its circumscription and never gives herself entirely to it.

Not surprisingly, speech, in Koltès, and writing in its theatrical form, follow a same pattern of supplementing the “mother tongue” – which is both “incomprehensible” and “individual” – paradoxically using language to defy articulation. Koltèsian speech

blurs the lines between life and writing and presents itself as a prolongation of the silent speech *of* the mother, but also as an inarticulate and elliptic speech *on* the mother.

The Narcissistic moment of (self-)recognition, the Lacanian *méconnaissance* and the moment of Narcissus' "*Iste ego sum*" – "that is I" – may be read as one same address. That address is directed not just to the *imago* appearing on the surface of the watery mirror, but to the *mirror* that supports the *imago*: i.e. the mother. « ... tu étais à ma place, tu étais moi... » [Lettre 18 Juillet 1965, 35] writes Koltès to his mother July 18 1965, admitting to an identification we said belonged to the category of "primary narcissism." Informed by the Ovidian text, we may now read this statement as overshadowing the entire address of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts*, with heavy psychoanalytic implications, as a double confession by the two-faced figure Koltès-Narcissus. *Moi*, the *imago*, identifies itself as the extension of the *tu*, the mother, while the *tu* operates in the place indicated by the deictic *Iste*, i.e. *le ça*, the *id*. The present tense of the Ovidian *Iste* already invokes the past tense of the *tu étais*: in that, from the moment the identification with the mother is enunciated, the separation has already occurred, and that identification is already broken. As a result the Koltèsian past tense recognizes the separation of *moi* from *tu*, and dates their long lost homogeneity in an always already irrecoverable past. But the Koltèsian *tu étais moi* and the Ovidian *Iste ego sum* operate in fact in the same time frame, through the same performative power of their enunciations which alone causes the birth of the ego and the separation from the maternal body. The past tense *étais* in Koltès' proposition refers to the bygone event of a past cleavage between the pronouns, but it operates that cleavage in the present event of its enunciation. For that reason, the event of the present tense *Iste* structurally equates with

the past tense of *tu étais*, because both enunciations produce in similar ways the event of the cleavage between the child from the mother. Accordingly, these two performative enunciations, which effectively give birth to the speaking ego, operate in a disjointed temporality of an event that happens in both the present and the past.

The recently published letters by the writer's brother, François Koltès, unveil in details Bernard-Marie's now legendary love for his mother, Germaine, and the extent of her role as the most important and omnipresent addressee. In a letter from September 1977, Koltès writes to his mother following a confession she made upon reading the manuscript of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* for the first time: she could not understand anything of it. Her reaction was merely summarized in this reductive, if not demeaning statement: « il n'y a pas que le sexe dans la vie, et ton texte ne parle que de cela » [*Lettres* 300]. Koltès' first reaction was an emphatic affirmation of what we call the most fundamental law of his theatrical writing: « si tu veux comprendre tous ceux qui ne parlent pas le même langage que toi [...], il faut se rendre compte que, en général, plus la chose est importante, essentielle, plus il est impossible de la dire : c'est à dire : plus on a besoin de parler d'autres choses pour se faire comprendre par d'autres moyens que les mots qui ne suffisent plus » [*Lettres* 299]. To add on to his argumentation, Koltès goes on asserting that the role of theater, as he perceives it, is to act simply as “*un reste*,” a “remainder” of common language, when the latter fails to communicate: « Quant à ce qu'est ce reste, je ne peux pas te le dire comme cela, puisqu'il m'a fallu une pièce pour l'exprimer et qu'il n'y a pas d'autres moyens » [*Lettres* 300]. According to these statements, theater solely acknowledges the limits of articulate speech and acts as the unspeakable remainder that supplements it. Following a distinction made at the beginning

of this chapter, we can say that Koltès' writing navigates between two opposite poles: the commonly used French language on the one hand, and the unspeakable mother tongue on the other hand. Somewhere in between these two poles, theater happens.

Then Koltès responds to his mother's irreversible verdict and sheer incomprehension of his text, asserting that it all participates in his elaboration of theatrical writing and that, more essentially, she alone is the figure who may understand, without knowing it, *everything* he writes. This reaction does not lack in violence, but also participates in the "absolute" and "unique love" he bears for her, that is, as we will see shortly, « un amour chrétien » :

J'ai reçu ton mot. Je suis content, par dessus tout, de ta réaction, du fait que tu ne juges pas de manière catégorique – comme ne manqueront pas de le faire tous ceux qui ne comprendront pas –, et que simplement, tu constates qu'il s'agit de quelque chose qui t'échappe ; bien sûr que je voudrais que tu comprennes de quoi je parle ; mais nous avons des existences, des univers complètement différents, et c'est cela qui est bien, puisque en réalité, on se sent si proche ; il ne faut pas s'attarder ni regarder le fait que je vis, que je connais et m'intéresse à un monde qui t'es étranger : l'important, c'est que je sente que tu es la personne la plus proche de moi, au delà de ça. Il y a des gens qui connaissent ce dont je parle, et avec lesquels, pourtant, je ne peux parler de rien. Ce qui compte, c'est la manière dont on voit les choses, et si je te montre mes textes et si je t'en parle, bien que je sais que tu ne connais pas ce dont je parle, c'est seulement pour que, me connaissant, tu saches (du moins je l'espère) que si je m'y intéresse, c'est que ce n'est pas dérisoire (suis-je vaniteux ?), et qu'on ne peut pas, comme cela, régler la

question en disant : quel sujet vulgaire, superficiel, peu élevé ! Pour ma part, je suis sûr qu'il s'agit là, précisément, du sujet le plus élevé dont on puisse parler : la solitude affective, la difficulté de parler, toutes les oppressions enfin qui ferment la bouche (mon personnage est un personnage de théâtre : c'est pour cela qu'il peut s'exprimer ; comme l'ont tout de suite remarqué les loulous à qui on a montré la pièce : dans la vie on ne rencontre jamais un interlocuteur idéal comme celui-là, qui écoute deux heures de monologue hésitant sans interrompre, ce qui permet au personnage de dire tout). A côté de cela, que tu ne connaisses pas ce dont je parle (et qui représente pourtant la majorité des gens), cela est moins important. [...] Tu as une existence, je crois, extrêmement privilégiée, très à l'abri, très en dehors de ce qui constitue les principales préoccupations de la plupart des gens, de la masse ; et d'autre part (ou est-ce la même chose ?), sur le plan affectif, quoi que tu puisses penser du fait des difficultés, tu as connu un confort affectif exceptionnel, plus exceptionnel encore que tu ne le crois. Tout cela, je te le dis sans rien affirmer : c'est ce qu'il me semble. Mais d'un autre côté, tu as connu, à l'intérieur même de cet abri, toutes les souffrances inévitables, qui te permettent de comprendre tout, et je suis persuadé de cela ; il suffit de passer la barrière du langage, et tout doit t'être accessible. [*Lettres* 291-292, Koltès emphasizes]

According to Koltès, beyond her inability to comprehend her son's language, and the world it describes, the mother is endowed with the power to understand absolutely *everything*, most especially when it comes to her son. Here again, Koltès establishes an

identity and a likeness between people of radically dissimilar characteristics, for instance comparing the hermetic world of his mother to that of a homeless beggar under the pouring rain. That correspondence is made possible prior to any form of analogy or intelligible communication between the two worlds. It is only justified by the fact that Koltès' mother has also lived, in her own right, in what he calls an extreme state of « solitude affective ». To put it differently, Koltès establishes the possibility of another form of communication, prior to linguistic transparency, that bridges individuals whose only common feature is having experienced a state of absolute solitude, in worlds that are otherwise singularly different and unbridgeable.

Replying to his mother concerning her incapacity to understand his text, Koltès describes a similar distance, infinite and seemingly irreconcilable, separating the two of them. He describes that difference as an epistemological separation between their two incompatible worlds. On the one hand, Koltès asserts an epistemological and discursive gap; then on the other hand, he states that this infinite distance may be bridged by means of what he calls an « amour chrétien » : « Aristote a pensé et connu le monde sans quitter le coin de sa cheminée ; Lawrence d'Arabie a parcouru physiquement l'univers pour le comprendre : voilà les deux extrêmes de la connaissance [...] ; voilà (toutes proportions gardées !) la seule différence entre nous, la seule entre papa et toi, [...] et ces deux types "d'explorations" sont plus proches l'un de l'autre à cause du même désir (ou "amour", en terme chrétien) fondamental » [*Lettres* 292]. The maternal figure gifted with a divine ability to know everything in advance, yet trapped by an infinite epistemological and discursive gap, is at the source of a "Christian love" bridging any such radical separation.

(It is noteworthy that if the mother's divine attribute entitles Koltès to act as her elected offspring, this mythological lineage is not simply a product of the author's own discursive world. Friends and family and most recently his biographer, Brigitte Salino, have participated quite actively in the creation of that Koltèsian mythology, promoting, for instance, the mother's omniscience over her son: Germaine had a "premonition," as reported by Salino and recounted by Koltès' neighbor in Paris, Josiane Fritz, of her son's "suicide attempt," phoning Fritz from Metz to go to his apartment and find him in a coma.<sup>86</sup> Salino, above all, brings the genre of biographical writing to a striking level of sublimation, all along her book and right from her opening page describing, with over-indulging lyricism, a truly Messianic Koltèsian figure walking in the street, emanating with light and gifted by « *la grâce* ». <sup>87</sup>)

One must remain suspicious of the discursive power of myth, or what appears to be the elaboration of a Koltèsian metaphysics, in which the mother acts quite literally as a divine figure. The function of that metaphysics of desire – channeled through the immanent and omniscient maternal body – participates in the glorification of a primary

---

<sup>86</sup> « Josiane Fritz et Bernard-Marie Koltès passent une soirée à discuter. Puis ils rentrent place Broglie, où ils habitent le même immeuble, au cinquième étage, dans des appartements différents. Le lendemain matin, Madame Koltès appelle Josiane : « Elle a eu un pressentiment. Elle m'a demandé d'aller voir Bernard. » Josiane sonne à la porte. Comme il n'y a pas de réponse, elle passe par les balcons, qui communiquent. Bernard est étendu sur le canapé qu'il a tiré vers la fenêtre pour voir la cathédrale. Il est dans le coma. Josiane appelle les pompiers, les parents Koltès arrivent. [...] Quand Bernard est sorti de l'hôpital et qu'il est revenu place Broglie, il a sonné chez moi. Il portait un manteau de Jean-Marie. Il m'a dit bonjour et puis il a ri, comme s'il ne s'était rien passé. Et on n'a jamais parlé de la tentative de suicide. C'était lui, ça. » [Salino 103-104].

<sup>87</sup> « Un instant a été fixé : un jeune homme marche vers vous, et sourit. Il est long et mince, avec un casque de cheveux bouclés. Il porte un jean et un sweat-shirt à l'effigie du chanteur de Burning Spear, le group de reggae. Ses mains, solides, ne retiennent rien. Ses poches semblent vides./ Comme on le dira si souvent de lui, Bernard-Marie Koltès est très beau. Mieux : il avait la grâce. Quelque chose de solaire » [Salino 9].



state that is in fact, quite to the contrary, one of complete dispossession, powerlessness, and death. Such a primary state of immanence and non-separation becomes quickly undermined, even wrenched apart by the advent of theatrical writing as we define it.

It is accordingly noteworthy that the “Christian love” for the mother here mentioned by Koltès strangely duplicates the love Saint Augustin nourished for his God, whose omniscience he says in his introduction may still not predict the outcome of the *act* of writing his *Confessions*: for it is the act alone, rather than the written text, that makes the confession. (One might accordingly read Koltès’ theatrical writing as a particular form of “confession,” in the sense described hereafter). Jacques Derrida recalls in his own *Circonfession* that the “mother” figure acts as « le Dieu de Saint Augustin lorsque celui-ci demande s’il y a du sens à lui avouer quelque chose alors qu’il sait tout d’avance, [...] comme si Augustin voulait encore, à force d’amour, faire qu’en arrivant à Dieu, à Dieu quelque chose arrive, et lui arrive quelqu’un qui transformât la science de Dieu en une docte ignorance, il dit devoir le faire en écrivant, justement, après la mort de sa mère » [*Circonfessions* 19]. Derrida recalls Saint Augustin’s opening page of his *Confessions* where he asserts that no secret and no sin may be unveiled to an omniscient God, while his book directly addresses Him. Rather in writing those confessions something may occur, unpredictable, that is *other* than a knowable truth, a confession of an act that escapes foreseeable knowledge. Writing thus affects the transparent object of confession, the truth itself, as Derrida reads Augustine saying, and makes it *other* (« *faire* » *la vérité autre*), mis-recognizable (*méconnaissable*), incomprehensible, and inarticulate.

The elocution of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* endorses the same structure of writing, one that accordingly alters (divine) knowledge into “learned ignorance” (*docte*

*ignorance*). The act of elocution confronts the sentence (« la grande phrase ») to a singular and primary mode of *communion* with the mother, both immanent and pre-lingual. But far from any religious discourse, Koltès does not hesitate to equate this “Christian love” with the vulgar *act* of “fucking” a stranger in a one-night stand. In the letter from September 1977, Koltès reacts once again to Germaine’s response to his manuscript:

Il y a un degré de misère (sociale, ou moral, ou tout ce que tu veux) où le langage ne sert plus à rien, où la faculté de s’exprimer par les mots (qui est un luxe donné aux riches par l’éducation, voilà le fond de la question) n’existe plus. Or, (crois-moi sur parole !) il y a parfois un degré de connaissance, de tendresse, d’amour, de compréhension, de solidarité, etc. qui est atteint en une nuit, entre deux inconnus, supérieur à celui que parfois deux êtres en une vie ne peuvent atteindre.

[*Lettres* 300-301, Koltès emphasizes]

This state of communion or fraternity, pre-linguistic and immanent, Koltès also associates it explicitly to the category of *souffle*, whose originary structure we have previously exposed as the Aristotelian *pneuma*. *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* particularly confronts the futility of the sentence (« la grande phrase ») to the immanent *exchange of breath* between two anonymous individuals, whose pre-linguistic relationship does not fall short of being truly *incestuous*:

... cent mille ans avec elle sans baiser, et tu ne sais toujours rien, que les grandes phrases qui te rendent dingue, qu'est-ce que tu connais d'elle avec les grandes phrases, si tu ne sais pas comment elle est *avant* ... [la Nuit 40, I emphasize]

...qu'est-ce qu'on connaît de quelqu'un si on ne sait pas comment elle respire après avoir baisé, si elle garde les yeux ouverts ou fermés, si on n'écoute pas, longtemps, le bruit et le temps qu'elle met pour une respiration, où elle pose son visage et comment il est maintenant, plus le temps est long où elle respire et que tu l'écoutes, sans bouger, respirer, plus tu connais tout d'elle, mais dès qu'elle ouvre les yeux, se redresse, s'appuie sur le menton, te regarde, se met à respirer comme n'importe qui, ouvre sa bouche où tu vois les grandes phrases qui se préparent à sortir, alors moi, je suis pour me barrer... [la Nuit 4-41]

Because the exchange of *breath* happens *before* the sentence is complete, then that exchange pre-supposes the absolute knowledge of the other. « La grande phrase », in return, offers no form of knowledge, brings no new meaning of any kind. From the moment the sentence is uttered – and that of *la Nuit juste avant les forêts* finds here its own origin –, it signals the unpower (*impouvoir*) of the speaker and the *void* of its statement. This form of speech, for being inarticulate, acknowledges the possibility of a relationship occurring on the more primary level of *breathing*, but whose immanence is always already interrupted and cut out by the act of enunciation. For the sentence to become legible, it ought to *pre-suppose* an exchange of breath between the speaker and the listener, occurring somewhere in the middle of its course, for the two sides to be known to each other before it may say what it *must* say: the event of its birth; that event consists in the separation between the speaker and “Mama,” the girl on the bridge: «... je te parle sans vraiment te connaître, mais je te connais bien assez comme cela, mec, pour te parler de cela - une fille sur un pont... » [la Nuit 33-34]. This particular speech aims to

bear witness to its own inception, which necessarily escapes it. The sentence tries to recount the encounter with Mama, one night, on a bridge. But the event itself, what happened between the speaker of *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* and Mama, exceeds narration, articulation, and even intelligibility: « ... personne ne saura jamais qui a couché avec qui ... » [la Nuit 34]. This enunciation categorizes the act of lovemaking with Mama as belonging to a state prior to knowledge – that which Freud called “primary narcissism.” This same enunciation is then repeated, a few lines further down, slightly transformed, making now a similar assumption about “love” in general: « ... jusqu’à midi je suis resté sur le pont, [Mama] ce n’est pas son vrai nom et je ne lui ai pas dit le mien, personne ne saura jamais qui a aimé qui... » [Nuit 35]. This equation between what we called earlier “Christian love” and plain “fucking” explicitly embodies the entire relationship with the spectral figure of the mother, whose amputated (mis)quoted denomination – the *nickname* “Mama” – testifies to the impossibility of becoming become herself fully articulate and intelligible.

The utter powerlessness of the sentence to make known, to signify and to name “love” – which belongs to the order of the unsayable, and as far as Koltès is concerned, is also the subject of *inter-diction* – forces the sentence to regenerate from its own failure to account for, to reiterate and to quote the absolute yet irrecoverable knowledge of the mother. Because the gift of that knowledge is immanent, through the exchange of breath, the sentence delays its own completion, cuts through and fragments that knowledge by dint of perpetuating its enunciation. The *act* of love remains unsayable, but it summons the sentence to make it articulate, in a failed yet relentless effort. That calling reveals to be nothing short of the Beckettian effort to “fail again, fail better.” Koltès’ theatrical writing

emerges from that impossible injunction. Following the night on the bridge, Mama has already disappeared, always already left, never to return. From that separation emerges the very first word, of which all others become a mere quotation, written on the bridge, above the *void*. The word “Mama” is the first word to be uttered, thus bearing witness to the separation from the maternal body. That first babbling – of the already dead *infans* – gives birth to the sentence, now transformed into a hopeless cry for the impossible reunification between the speaking child and the mother: « ... sans bouger, en plein milieu d'un pont, dans la journée, j'ai écrit sur les murs : mama je t'aime mama je t'aime, sur tous les murs, pour qu'elle ne puisse pas ne pas l'avoir lu, je serai sur le pont, mama, toute la nuit, le pont de l'autre nuit, tout le jour, j'ai couru comme un fou : reviens mama reviens, j'ai écrit comme un fou : mama, mama, mama... » [Nuit 35-36]. From the moment when the first word, “Mama,” is uttered, the separation has already occurred. « La grande phrase » in *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, along with Koltès’ *breath* that prolongs it and twists it, will fail to say what “*it*” must say. Instead of bearing signification, the sentence bears witness to the separation between the speaker and the omniscient and loving maternal body, while that cleavage and scission occur through the simple act of enunciation alone. Theatrical writing then unfolds itself, through the injunction of putting the sentence to the test of *breath*, so to bring forth no more knowledge, but a “learned ignorance,” says Jacques Derrida. The task of quoting the unsaid “mother” recalls the birth of the very first word, “Mama,” which theatrical writing perpetuates through combined breath and enunciation. The act of love – for Koltès, it is always already “incestuous” – calls for writing to mutilate itself and yearn for a state of muteness, prior to articulate language, by means of self-negation and perpetual *erasure*:

J'ai écrit en effaçant sans cesse. Je suis persuadé que là est notre seul travail, savoir supprimer. Trois personnes sur dix savent bien écrire, c'est la grammaire, cela n'a aucun intérêt. Non, notre vrai boulot, c'est de savoir enlever les mauvaises choses. Quand le matin je parviens à gommer ce que j'ai écrit comme un cochon la veille au soir, je me dis que ma réussite – si réussite il y a – est dans cet instinct là. [Salino 226]

### Chapter 3

#### ***Le théâtre des paroles: the Stage of the Infant Tongue***

This chapter will examine a structural conflict between the functions of speech (*la parole*) and of the stage (*la scène*) in the theater, in light of the emergence in the past decades of the so-called *le théâtre des paroles*. This contemporary manifestation presents the fiercest resistance, as of yet, to the space of representation as instituted by Aristotle's elaboration of tragedy, through the actors' speech alone. In order to articulate the singularity of that theater, most powerfully at work in the writings of Valère Novarina, I will begin by fleshing out the said conflict (i.e. a structural incompatibility) between speech and the stage, already present yet repressed – even foreclosed – in the early days of tragedy. I will begin by sketching, in Aristotle's elaboration of tragedy, an unacknowledged yet primary function of the theatrical medium, i.e. the actor's speech posited as both disruptive and generative of the dramatic stage. I will then elaborate on the stage's inability to re-present what Freud calls the 'primal scene,' in a short and posthumous essay on "psychopathic theater," where he calls for a *revival* of neurosis in the spectator by means of theater, made possible through a so-called "neurotic identification" or "unconscious communication." This omnipresent yet unacknowledged threat to mimetic representation, in the pre-dramatic and non-cathartic theater, increasingly finds acknowledgment in a non-clinical approach to the theater of 'madness' or 'cruelty,' particularly with Artaud's association of theater to a process of "psychic

contamination” and Nietzsche’s too often forgotten precedence of the Barbarian Dionysus threatening the stability of Attic Tragedy. My emphasis on Artaud and Nietzsche’s re-appropriation of ‘madness’ against a clinical discourse allows me to situate the contemporary emergence of *le théâtre des parole*, and Novarina’s work particularly, as a singular and unprecedented appreciation of the theater as both disruptive and generative of drama and mimesis. The prevalence of speech, enacted in its most primal and non-discursive form, will re-evaluate the stage as an originary space of conjuration of a ‘primal scene’ that remains both irretrievable and invisible.

### **Medium before drama**

Theater and theory together have shifted from strategies of interpretation and the governing rules of mimesis, relying instead on a singular and elliptical approach to speech, writing, and language. This current shift, whose most powerful manifestation on the stage will be *le théâtre des paroles*, results from a long lasting, until now unacknowledged conflict between on the one hand *enunciated* speech and on the other hand the *visibility* of the space of representation. As I will lay out throughout this section, the act of enunciation (distinct from its posited discursive content) cracks open the boundaries of the visible field of representation and of *mimesis*; in fact, *la parole* makes the notion of *la scène* become *obscure* both to the gaze and the mind. The act of enunciation creates a split – a blind spot – in the visual field of *la scène*. This blind spot is made visible in the translation of the French term *la scène* into English, becoming



divided into two distinct words: a first translation as ‘the stage’ refers predominantly to the space of artistic performance intended to be shared in the public domain, whereas a second translation as ‘the scene’ indicates rather the space of an incident, or an event (often past) in ‘real life.’ This double meaning, made evident in English, underscores the double bind of two almost *incompatible* yet *inseparable* functions of the notion of *scène*. The first offers, as we will see, the delineated *stage* of re-presentation for scopie consumption by the eyes and the mind of the public, in regard to both theater and theoretical thought. The second (more in the order of Mannoni’s *l’autre scène*) denotes the singular dimension of a ‘scene’ where an *event* has taken place in a distant past, remaining irrecoverable in its entirety to the public gaze: it denotes rather a ‘primary’ function that is incompatible with the common field of *re*-presentation. This second function refers to the notion of “primal scene” which according to Freud belongs to the *individual* psyche as “one special class of experiences of the utmost importance for which no memory can as a rule be recovered which occurred in very early childhood and were not understood at the time.”<sup>88</sup> The present section seeks to examine the disruptive power of *speech* as already present in the original elaboration of tragedy by Aristotle, where speech is defined as the medium of theater opening the stage of representation to a more inaccessible and disruptive *scène primitive*.

---

<sup>88</sup> Sigmund Freud, Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II) The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913), 149, hereafter referred to as Freud RRWT.

In *Theatricality as Medium*,<sup>89</sup> Samuel Weber skillfully argues that the field of representation, from the start of Western culture, has suffered from a fundamental split or irresolvable tension between *speaking* and *staging*, which also takes part in a contemporary debate on the functionality of the media in the digital/virtual age. He contends that such a split relates to a broader conception of notions of theater and theoretical discourse, both of which, he argues, rely traditionally on a *scopic* dimension always already embedded in the notion ‘representation.’ As Weber notes:

*Theater* has the same etymology as the term *theory*, from the Greek word *Thea*, designating a place from which to observe or to see. The fact that *theater*, like *television* today, has always involved much more than simply seeing only makes this privileging of sight all the more significant, and questionable. The privileging of sight over the other senses, especially hearing, which is implied in the currency of words such as *theory* and *theater*, but also *television*, often results from the desire to secure a position from which things can be viewed and controlled, from a distance that ostensibly permits one to view the object in its entirety while remaining at a safe remove from it [Weber 3].

Within traditional categories, ‘seeing’ overshadows ‘hearing’ by tracing a secured boundary around the stage of representation. These demarcations create a safe distance between the viewer and the visual object presented on stage as a circumscribed whole, offering itself *as is*, without the risk of contaminating or affecting the viewer. This

---

<sup>89</sup> Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004, hereafter referred to as Weber.

scoping construction falls in line with Aristotle's re-definition of *mimesis* providing direct access to (and clear knowledge of) the imitated object, by way of aesthetic pleasure. We thus remain securely distant from the content of the image by the demarcated boundaries of an unyielding screen (that of the [tele]vision, or memory, for instance). As Weber argues, both *theater* and *theory* have nurtured an ambiguous relationship with the double aural/oral function. This tense relationship suggests that the *active* functions of speech and hearing were disruptive of the Western dependence on the concept of visibility from an early period.

This tension, presented by Weber, reveals to be vigorously at work in (and symptomatic of) the history of Western Theater. That history relies predominantly on the esthetic category of drama as a genre, which demonstrates to have a complex and even repressed relationship with a more primary dimension of 'theater,' which Weber identifies as the *medium*. According to him, the theater as medium exceeds and escapes the aesthetic form of drama as a mode of representation. He argues that the conflict underlying dramatic constructions consists in a "tension between the effort to reduce the theatrical medium to a means of meaningful representation by enclosing its space within an ostensibly self-contained narrative, and the resistance of this medium to such reduction" [Weber X]. Weber opens up the possibility of tracing this tension back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, wherein the lack of articulation of theater *prior* to tragedy has consistently resulted in the assimilation of its *medium* to the rules of tragedy as a *genre*.

For Aristotle, the birth of tragedy – and implicitly of the theater, *a fortiori* – takes place in the defining shift between ritualistic ceremonies and the formation of the chanting chorus. The chorus constitutes the primary element of the tragic genre, and

constitutes in itself the ancestor of tragedy. The shift constitutive of tragedy takes place as a split within that ‘primitive’ form, which becomes fragmented by such playwrights as Aeschylus, one of the first to introduce on stage a protagonist – and therefore an ‘actor’ in the modern sense of the term – separate from the chanting chorus. In Aristotelian terms, that separation authorizes the possibility of tragedy as a dramatic genre.

Even though Aristotle never articulates the functional distinction between theater and tragedy, it remains nonetheless implicit to his entire definition of the genre, as far the former is *implied* as a constitutive element of the latter. In fact in the *Poetics*, theater, *in itself*, does not belong to the category of imitative arts, as does tragedy. One may recover the function of theater through the distinction that Aristotle makes between the three major elements constitutive of a mimetic art: “the three factors by which the imitative arts are differentiated: the media, the objects they represent, and their manner of representation” [1448a]. The second and the third elements are extensively discussed in the *Poetics*. As Aristotle argues, the idiosyncrasy of theatrical mimesis, in respect to other arts, is that its object consists in an *action* which must be represented on stage by means of the *plot* (*muthos*). Even though *plot* and *action* are clearly interrelated, Aristotle claims that the first belongs to the field of representation, whereas the second remains exterior to it; the relationship between action and plot translates into a simple axiom: “the representation of the action is the plot” [1449b]. Simply put, the *plot* constitutes the manner through which the *action* is represented. The plot is created by narration and dramatization, and its tragic effectiveness relies on a series of rules such as the unities of space, time, and action. The *medium* of theatrical mimesis, however, is identified as a *third* separate element, distinct from the object and manner of tragedy: “Now since the

representation is carried out by men performing the actions, it follows, in the first place, that spectacle is an essential part of tragedy, and secondly that there must be song and diction, these being the medium of representation” [1449b]. Aristotle clearly identifies the medium of tragedy as *song* and *diction*, words enunciated on stage by performing agents, i.e. the actors (*prattontes*).

Aristotle’s portrayal of the relationship between speech enactment (diction) and stage representation (spectacle) is well known: “Spectacle, or stage-effect, is an attraction, of course, but it has the least to do with the playwright's craft or with the art of poetry. For the power of tragedy is independent both of performance and of actors, and besides, the production of spectacular effects is more the province of the property-man than of the playwright” [1450b].<sup>90</sup> By privileging speech over staging, Aristotle’s statement suggests a prevalence of the *medium* of tragedy – speech enactment – as it allows for and over-determines the scopic stage function. Speech enacted by performing agents (*prattontes*) on the stage is accordingly denoted as the primary theatrical *medium*.

As a result, the *imitated* object of tragedy suffers from the grip of that pre-tragic *medium*: prior to the imposed restrictions of tragedy as a genre, Aristotle indeed distinguishes the object of theatrical mimesis from those of other mimetic arts. For the

---

<sup>90</sup> On this particular point, Weber notes that Aristotle’s positioning in respect to the *medium* of theater is unexpectedly similar to Artaud’s theoretical writing on theater, whose fundamental claim is to rip theater of its dramatic elements, its narrative constructions, and psychological characters [Weber 280]. As we read in the *Poetics*: “*tragedy is a representation, not of men, but of action and life*, of happiness and unhappiness - and happiness and unhappiness are bound up with action. The purpose of living is an end which is a kind of activity, not a quality; it is their characters, indeed, that make men what they are, but it is by reason of their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Tragedies are not performed, therefore, in order to represent character, although character is involved for the sake of the action. Thus the incidents and the plot are the end aimed at in tragedy, and as always, the end is everything. Furthermore, there could not be a tragedy without action, but there could be without character;” [1450a, my emphasis].

*action* destined to be represented by the plot is not already *in itself* a definable and circumscribed object fit to be re-produced on stage. While language functions as the fundamental medium of tragedy, making the action accessible to mimesis, it alone remains inapt, on its own, to represent the action on stage without the imposed rules of tragedy for plot construction.

The rift between tragedy as a literary genre and its theatrical medium becomes indeed conspicuous in Aristotle's unequivocal appeal for dramatization, which aims to tame away the unruliness of the *action* – now made accessible through diction – thus transforming it into a self-contained *plot*: “Thus, just as in the other imitative arts each individual representation is the representation of a single object, so too the plot of a play, being the representation of an action, must present it as a unified whole; and its various incidents must be so arranged that if any one of them is differently placed or taken away the effect of wholeness will be seriously disrupted” [1451a]. The need for containing the action qua plot presupposes a distinction between the different mimetic arts, particularly between those of tragedy and the visual arts such as painting. While the first is stated by Aristotle to be the *mimesis* of an *action* made recognizable only through the prescribed rules of tragedy, the second is the *mimesis* of an *object* whose already *pre-defined* qualities are made accessible by visual representation. The mimetic function of theatre, as defined here, proves to be far more complex and unpredictable than visual mimesis, such as painting. It is so mostly because its object prior to representation – i.e. action – escapes any *objective* and stable definition. The complexity of the theatrical *action* (and more to the point, Aristotle famously calls this *action: life*) becomes a derivative attribute of the medium of theater *prior* to dramatic construction by tragedy. Following Aristotle's

categories, the medium alone fails to *objectify* the action into a self contained, graspable – scopic – image, as painting for instance succeeds in doing.

In his own reading of Aristotle, Samuel Weber succeeds in uncovering the disruptive influence of the theatrical ‘medium-action’ over Aristotle’s carefully constructed and self-contained dramatic-plot. Weber skillfully does so by emphasizing the ambiguity inherent in the ‘double address’ of the actor’s speech on stage. On the one hand, Weber rightfully notes that the series of rules of tragedy set by Aristotle – who famously prescribes them within the purview of ‘science’ – are meant to tame the complexity of the theatrical medium into a recognizable whole. In this sense, their purpose is to transform the medium-action, occurring in the actors’ speech on stage (*prattontes*), into an imitable *object* by means of a dramatic plot (*muthos*). This plot construction would in return allow for a process of (re-)cognition to occur. As Weber sums it up, Aristotle’s *Poetics* “constitutes the ambivalent beginning of a powerful tradition that seeks to subordinate the medium of theater to a conception of drama as a poetic genre serving the representation of action structured as a coherent and complete narrative” [Weber 265]. Weber states that the ambiguity inherent in theatrical mimesis, as presented in the *Poetics*, takes place in a disavowed and unacknowledged shift between the function of the ‘actors’ (*prattontes*) on stage (the ‘en-actors’ of speech) and their dramatic characters taking part in a careful construction of the ‘action’ as plot (*muthos*). Weber argues:

The staging of a plot, however unified it may seem, is never as unified and integrated as Aristotle would like to believe. Theater never stages a plot directly

precisely because it involves staging. It can do without a narrator, but it cannot do without the stage and those who act upon it. The fact that theatrical acting is never the pure representation of acts but rather the actualization of acting upon a stage drives a wedge between “acting” and “action” that remains “active” even in contemporary English. This is even more powerfully at work in Aristotle’s Greek when it describes, however ambiguously, how the “acting” of the *prattontes* actualizes nothing so much as the split constitutive of all mimesis. Neither actor nor role can function without the other, but they do not necessarily add up to a whole. That Aristotle is acutely aware of this danger is indicated by his persistent attempt to subordinate everything having to do with the distinctive medium of theater, and, a fortiori, of tragedy, to the “goal” of presenting a unified action qua plot. [Weber 265]

Consequently, theater may be legitimately separated altogether from the category of mimetic arts, since, as Weber puts it, theater is “constitutive of all mimesis” prior to its denomination as *art*. In the same way, prior to the careful elaboration of tragedy as a genre and the possibility of catharsis on the dramatic stage (*scène*), theater imposes itself as the locus where speech occurs in its *nascent* stage (*stade*), before any narrative or dramatic construction. It continuously works to dislodge the *muthos* by means of speech enactment by the *prattontes*, and during this process, theater clearly takes precedence over (and excludes itself from) any form of aesthetic production. It acquires the more originary and primal function of being at the same time *generative* and *disruptive* of mimesis, discourse, and even cognitive identification. Through this function, the



originary drive of theater – tentatively called *theatricality* – posits itself as an equally generative and disruptive drive at the origin of *any* artistic form, and more radically yet, of any form of language and discourse engaged in the mimetic process.

By detaching itself from mimesis and dramatization, the present notion of theater as a non-category consequently refuses the Aristotelian cathartic process, the purgation of pity and fear, whose accomplishment relies on dramatic constructions of plot (*mythos*), reversal (*peripeteia*), and recognition (*anagnorisis*). Provided that Aristotelian catharsis is no longer at the spectator's disposal, non-dramatic theater reinstates the risk of contamination of *pathos* beyond the boundaries of the stage. As I will argue in the next section, the porosity of those boundaries and the imminent risk of contamination allow for what Freud calls the “psychopathic theater,” which will provide the tools to rethink theatricality – beyond any therapeutic pretention – as a primary process of “unconscious communication.”

### **The ‘Psychopathic’ Theater**

In a striking passage from *the Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud makes a digression from his key topic of dream formation to a peculiar phenomenon occurring among hysterics, which he calls “hysterical identification.” In reaction to current discussions of the time on the so-called issue of “psychical infection,” Freud feels the urgent desire to elaborate a new approach to “imitation,” one that would differ from the received idea of voluntarily reproduction of an ‘illness’ between patients. In dissociating “hysterical identification”

from “hysterical imitation,” Freud claims to bring a deeper level of appreciation of the phenomenon consisting in the ability of *mimicking*, among a number of different hysterical patients, one single and specific symptom. This uncanny phenomenon of ‘symptomatic contamination,’ he begins to explain, results from the ability among a group of individuals to assimilate each other’s particular state of affect and suffering without any conscious intent:

What is the meaning of hysterical identification? It requires a somewhat lengthy explanation. Identification is a highly important factor in the mechanism of hysterical symptoms. It enables patients to express in their symptoms not only their own experiences but those of a large number of other people; it enables them, as it were, to suffer on behalf of a whole crowd of people and *to act all the parts in a play* single-handed. I shall be told that this is not more than the familiar hysterical imitation, the capacity of hysterics to imitate any symptoms in other people that may have struck their attention —sympathy, as it were, intensified to the point of reproduction. This, however, does no more than show us the path along which the psychological process in hysterical imitation proceeds. The path is something different from the mental act which proceeds along it [*my emphasis*].

Let us note in passing that Freud’s declared intention is not to reject the mimetic structure of “hysterical imitation” as a whole, but to demonstrate that the mental apparatus behind the mimetic act exceeds the conventional acceptance of voluntary “reproduction.” This distinction then allows him to make an even more complex argument. While the mental

activity of mimesis is not simply involuntary and unconscious, the process of imitation of the *same* symptom, among a number of patients, results in fact from *different* unconscious causes :

The latter [mental act] is a little more complicated than the common picture of hysterical imitation; it consists in the unconscious drawing of an inference, as an example will make clear. Supposing a physician is treating a woman patient, who is subject to a particular kind of spasm, in a hospital ward among a number of other patients. He will show no surprise if he finds one morning that this particular kind of hysterical attack has found imitators. He will merely say: 'The other patients have seen it and copied it; it's a case of psychical infection.' That is true; but the psychical infection has occurred along some such lines as these. As a rule, patients know more about one another than the doctor does about any of them; and after the doctor's visit is over they turn their attention to one another.

Let us imagine that this patient had her attack on a particular day; then the others will quickly discover that it was caused by a letter from home, the revival of some unhappy love-affair, or some such thing. Their sympathy is aroused and they draw the following inference, *though it fails to penetrate into consciousness*: 'If a cause like this can produce an attack like this, *I may have the same kind of attack since I have the same grounds for having it.*' If this inference were capable of entering consciousness, it might possibly give rise to a fear of having the same kind of attack. But in fact the inference is made in a different psychical region, and

consequently results in the actual realization of the dreaded symptom. Thus identification is not simple imitation but assimilation on the basis of a *similar aetiological pretension*; it expresses a resemblance and is derived from a common element which remains in the unconscious. [*my emphases*]<sup>91</sup>

The “common element” shared between different patients is characterized by similar unconscious conflicts derived from utterly different origins, thus allowing the assimilation of similar symptoms as a result of those conflicts. There is imitation of symptoms insofar as the *same* conflict is grounded in *different* unconscious processes in respect to each individual patient, triggered by compulsive reactions to repressed objects that, in turn, cannot be shared or imitated. As Jacques Lacan puts it in a reading of this particular passage on “hysterical identification”: « Si notre patient s’identifie à son amie, c’est de ce qu’elle est inimitable. »<sup>92</sup> While a symptom is imitable due to an identification with the other’s conflict, the unconscious causes for the conflict remain, for each and every person, inimitable. In the Freudian context, this necessary pre-condition of inimitability in respect to “hysterical mimesis” is linked to what Lacan describes as a patient’s particular “unsatisfied desire:” *dissatisfaction* and *conflict* are intrinsic part of mimesis as far as a singular object governs the desire of each individual. Accordingly, that which Freud calls mimetic “infection” is made possible precisely because of the *impossibility of pure imitation* of another’s singular desire. In other words, mimesis is made possible as a symptomatic manifestation resulting from dissatisfactions that remain

---

<sup>91</sup> Freud, S. (1900). *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IV (1900): The Interpretation of Dreams, 148-149.

<sup>92</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1966, 625.

singular to each individual.

The overreaching stakes of “mimetic infection” beyond the boundaries of analytic discourse becomes all the more evident in a short text by Freud, called “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage,” that stands out for two reasons: first, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes: “among all posthumous texts this one stands alone as an enigma, not only because Freud did not publish it (nor want it published, or write it for publication), but because he seems to have ‘forgotten’ its existence, or in any event *lost touch* with it.”<sup>93</sup> We may indeed welcome that erasure as already part of what we call ‘theatricality,’ in that this text calling for a necessary *revival* of neurosis was not intended to be part of the Freudian corpus, yet occupies a unique place in it after the fact. Second, it is the only text, however brief, that addresses directly the question of theater as an apparatus. Yet it also calls for a different understanding of theatricality from the declared rules of Aristotelian catharsis, providing an open door for theater to be relieved from the constraint of re-cognition and interpretation.

Freud begins his short text by confronting the classical definition of Aristotelian catharsis, but he quickly departs from it in favor of a new frame of analysis, unusual in his work, of the so-called “modern” drama. Freud’s traces a shifting in the function of theater, as it emerged from ritualistic and sacrificial offerings to the Greek gods and was moved to the so-called “psychopathic” drama. In his response to Jean-François Lyotard’s criticism of Freud’s text, Lacoue-Labarthe also notes that this very shift for Freud is in itself a true departure from the conventions of catharsis. As a start, Freud notes that the

---

<sup>93</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe (1997), “Theatrum Analyticum” in Murray, Timothy, ed. (1997) *Mimesis, Masochism and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, Michigan: University of Michigan, 175.

theater originated as a staged process of assimilation between the sacrificed goat and the dying hero. As he puts it, both sacrifices released pleasure for the participants of the ritual, and similarly for the spectators watching the drama: while bearing witness to these massacres, the spectators also find pleasure in surviving the sacrifice. In order for this release of pleasure to take place, an identification must occur between the spectators and the hero-animal, on the basis of an illusion created by the theatrical apparatus: “The playwright-actors make all this possible for [the spectator] by giving him the opportunity to identify himself with the hero. But they thus spare him something also; for the spectator is well aware that taking over the hero’s role in his own person would involve such griefs, such sufferings and such frightful terrors as would almost nullify the pleasure therein.”<sup>94</sup> Freud infers accordingly that the whole notion of catharsis relies on an illusion, by the following conditions: “Hence his enjoyment presupposes an illusion: it presupposes an attenuation of his suffering through the certainty that from the first place it is another than him who acts and suffers on the stage, and that in the second place it is only a play, whence no threat to his personal security can ever arise” [Freud PCOS 145]. These two conditions are presented as an almost *contractual* and *conscious* agreement on the part of the spectator, and already presuppose assimilation between mimetic ‘illusion’ and ‘identification.’

Upon stating these two conditions, Freud departs from the notion of catharsis in the following way. Instead of bringing about purgation (or purification) of pain and suffering, the stage performance brings to the spectator, in Freud’s own terms, *masochistic* pleasure. In other words, Freud acknowledges that the spectator remains

---

<sup>94</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage,” in *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3. (Mar., 1960), 145, hereafter referred to as Freud PCOS.

always susceptible to pain and suffering, even when they manifest themselves in the form of pleasure.<sup>95</sup> The spectator's masochistic ability to derive pleasure from pain allows for an unusual take on 'receptivity' in the theater, one that exceeds the 'curative' conventions of Greek tragedy. This allows Freud to navigate from the angle of a traditional 'remedial' theater to that of a fundamentally 'pathogenic' theater. As it will soon become clear, the function of the latter theater will not necessarily exclude the former cathartic type. 'Pathogenic' theatricality rather *precedes* and *over-determines* the set conditions for catharsis to occur. For Freud, the plunge from conscious to unconscious receptivity reflects the transition of the *psychological* to *psychopathological* drama:

The psychological drama becomes the psychopathological, when the source of the suffering which we are to share and from which we are to derive pleasure is no longer between two almost equally conscious motivations, but one between conscious and repressed ones. Here *the pre-condition for enjoyment is that the spectator shall also be neurotic*, for it is only such people who can derive pleasure instead of aversion from the revelation and *the more or less conscious recognition of a repressed impulse*. In anyone who is not neurotic this recognition will meet only with aversion and will call up a readiness to repeat the act of repression [...].

[Freud PCOS 146-147, my emphasis]

---

<sup>95</sup> "The origin of drama in sacrificial rites (goat and scapegoat) in the cult of the gods cannot be without appositeness to this meaning of drama; it assuages as it were the beginning revolt against the divine order which decreed the suffering. The hero is at first a rebel against God or the divine, and it is from the feeling of misery of the weaker creature pitted against the divine might that pleasure may be set to derive, through masochistic gratification and the direct enjoyment of the personage whose greatness nevertheless the drama emphasizes." [Freud PCOS 145]

Psychopathological drama relies therefore on a double conditions: on the one hand, in order to identify with the un-conscious conflict of the character on stage, the spectator must *already* suffer from a state of neurosis; on the other hand, he or she shall be able to recognize neurosis *more or less* consciously. These two conditions translate into a broader rule that, for Freud, one is able to recognize neurosis only if one is *already* neurotic. For Freud, the paradigmatic structure of this psychopathological drama is presented by *Hamlet*, whose hero is split between impulses which, to the end, neither he nor the spectator will fully understand. On the opposite side, Freud argues that *Oedipus Rex* paradigmatically describes the structure of a *psychological* drama, by virtue of Oedipus being torn by two unconscious impulses that become, in the end, all too conscious both to him and to the spectators. The un-intelligible source of the conflict in the ‘psychopathic’ theater allows Freud to identify neurosis as a condition for ‘identification’ (or ‘infection’) between the character and the spectator. A spectator with resolved resistance to those conflicts will be unreceptive to the plot of the play. In *recognizing* only the conflict of the repressed impulses belonging to the character, the appropriate audience of Hamlet would acquire the ability to translate in *individual* impulses what the play itself has kept unsaid in the public realm.

This articulation of the pre-condition of neurosis remains however insufficient as an attempt to lay down a general theory of unconscious reception in the theater, even for Freud himself. Firstly, we have noted that the spectator’s neurotic identification does not necessarily equate to conscious recognition, or remembrance of an unconscious object. One may ask: What type of identification belongs to a “more or less conscious



recognition of a repressed impulse”? Freud chooses his words carefully when it comes to the spectator’s identification with the hero: “in this way resistance is definitely reduced, in the manner seen in psychoanalytic treatment, when the *derivatives* of the repressed ideas and emotions come to consciousness as a result of a lessening of resistance in a manner denied to the repressed material itself” [Freud PCOS 147, my emphasis]. The identification internally provokes, not the return of the repressed material (i.e. remembrance), but the manifestation of the *derivatives* of the repressed materials, which, differently put, is to say the emergence of new *symptoms*. The theatricality of the ‘psychopathic’ theater becomes thus embedded in a process of *symptomatic* contamination and clearly demonstrates a link with the process of “psychic infection” and “hysterical identification,” as discussed earlier.

Secondly, Freud is careful not to reduce the above neurotic pre-condition of unconscious conflict to the small circle of *neurotics* alone: “The repressed desire is one of those that are similarly repressed in *all of us*, the repression of which belongs to an early stage of our individual development, while the situation arising in the play shatters precisely this repression” [Freud PCOS 147, my emphasis]. How does one reconcile this statement, a *universal* claim in regard to repression, with the previous claim regarding the spectator’s truly *singular* state of neurosis needed for the recognition of the character’s repressed conflict on stage? For Freud, these two claims are in fact not incompatible as far as an individual is always susceptible to repression, even to the type (as mentioned previously) that remain *irrecoverable* to the psyche for having occurred in “early childhood.” One may accordingly say that counter-intuitively the traditional mechanisms

of reception, recognition, and interpretation in the theater require more of a “healthy” individual to be capable of becoming “ill,” as Freud says, *de novo*:

The sick neurotic is to us a man into whose conflict we can obtain no insight (empathy) when he presents itself to us in the form of a finished product. Conversely, if we are familiar with this conflict, we forget that he is a sick man, just as when he becomes familiar with it he himself ceases to be sick. It is thus the task of the dramatist to transport us into the same illness – a thing best accomplished if we follow him through its development. This will be particularly needful when the repression is not already existent in ourselves and must be therefore effected *de novo*. [Freud PCOS 147]

The relevance of this excerpt is twofold. Freud stresses indeed, on the one hand, that the condition of receptivity he speaks of is not exclusive to the neurotic spectator. Rather, it is a general condition that pertains even to the “healthy” spectator, as far as the stage performance causes the waning of one’s resistances and entails a particular state of neurosis, *de novo*. One can safely deduce from this that for Freud every individual is *potentially* always already subject to neurosis and is therefore susceptible to recognize – by force of exposure – the conflict between unconscious impulses provoked in him by the stage performance. On the other hand, Freud makes the bolder claim that prior to the possibility of a “cure,” one needs to reach a deeper state of “illness,” which provides access to truly new and unpredictable manifestations of the psyche. In Freud’s terms, the analyst will perceive the patient’s neurosis only on the condition of being “transported

into illness” in return, by means of weakening the resistances of his or her singular repressed desires. In respect to the above stated rules of receptivity, the analyst achieves recognition of his or her own conflict by means of the analysand’s enactment of unrecognized unconscious impulses. The analyst accordingly finds, from within, similar acts of repression, which in turn manifest themselves through the resurgence of new symptoms.

In the last lines of his text, Freud notes that this theater, which provokes individual neurosis by means of stage performance, exceeds in fact the representational space of the stage and becomes overwhelmingly and exceedingly *real*. He writes: “Where the full-blown and strange neurosis confronts us, in real life we call the physician and deem the person in question unsuitable as a stage figure” [Freud PCOS 148]. On this basis, the awakening of unconscious conflicts signals for Freud an urgent state of *reality* prior to representation and, therefore, to analytic interpretation.

### **Beyond Neurosis: of Plague, Cruelty, and Witchcraft**

Freud’s neurosis-based model for ‘unconscious communication’ derived from the ‘psychopathic’ theater seems at first to limit itself to the scope of repression, whose object re-emerges quite elliptically and ‘more or less’ consciously through its *derivatives*. In order to appreciate the full impact of Freud’s unique take on theater, one must take into consideration the later approach to repression in the essay from 1914, *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*, in which Freud also refers to a “special kind” of

experience that in fact may never be recovered by the individual for having occurred in ‘very early childhood,’ and whose impact over the ‘unconscious impulses’ becomes all the more powerful. Both essays read together may provide a view of ‘unconscious communication’ in the theater beyond the neurotic model, rather relying primarily on the (psychosis-based) notion of *foreclosure* and what the analysts Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillère call the *cut out* unconscious, which radically cancels out any possibility of identification and interpretation in the conventional meanings of the terms:

Folly cannot speak to us if it is not summoned to the analyst’s place by another character: a double not at all similar, not an alter ego, since in this context there is no longer an ego or an *alter*, no other in the mirror. [...] Now, Folly is difficult: one cannot be its partner at will. In this case, the transference consists in rejecting in turn all good intentions, all skills, all theories, pouncing on the one who lies in wait for it: an other appearing in the place of the analyst, always unexpected and enigmatic. It has nothing to do with resemblance or empathy, for the good reason that, in this context, nothing looks like anything anymore. For what comes onstage at the border of the human and the inhuman has nothing to do with the psychology of the characters but instead with what Antonin Artaud calls an event that has never gained acceptance. In analytic work, this theater is the royal road to the cut out unconscious [*l’inconscient retranché*], just as the interpretation of dreams gives access to the repressed unconscious.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup>Francoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillère. *History Beyond Trauma*. Trans. by Susan Fairfield. New York: Other Press, 2004, 244-245

The theatricality of a cut out unconscious exceeds the boundaries of repression and of neurosis, and, accordingly does not allow for the possibility of remembering, (mnestic) representation, re-cognition, or even interpretation. As Peter Brook famously puts it, the ‘empty space’ constitutes the true geography of the stage. This now psychotic-model of the function of the theatrical stage allows for Antonin Artaud’s premise that the theater’s function is not to *imitate* real life; much to the contrary, after this new setup, it is life that seeks to imitate this theater and its originary *cruelty*. In *le Théâtre et son double* Artaud restlessly denounces the communicative restrictions of language and promotes instead a theater whose function is to stimulate the “nervous sensitivity” of the “marrow.”<sup>97</sup> What Davoine and Gaudillère identify as the *event* of the cut out unconscious, Artaud articulates as, for lack of better words, “nervous magnetism,” or, as we will see, *psychic* contamination of a disease without any physical contact or viral transmission. But, this *event* of the cut out unconscious will have a much different impact than the classic *cathartic* theory, as laid out from Aristotle’s *Poetics* and, as we shall clarify, Nietzsche’s Attic tragedy, which in *Birth of Tragedy* will still seek to provide the ‘Ideal Spectator’ a sense of “metaphysical consolation.”<sup>98</sup>

For there to be Aristotelian *catharsis* – purgation/purification of *pathos*, a ‘typical cure’ in clinical parlance – there needs to be clear demarcations and guarantees of non-contamination between stage and audience. In that sense, *catharsis* requires preserving

---

<sup>97</sup>Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et la Cruauté, premier manifeste* (publié dans NRF en octobre 1932), *Théâtre et son Double*, in *Œuvres*, Gallimard, 2004, 557.

<sup>98</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner. New York: Penguin Books, 1993, 39, hereafter referred to as Nietzsche.

the *sacrality* of the space of representation. Nietzsche's Dionysian chorus of Attic Tragedy, which famously embody 'primordial suffering' (self-oblivion through pathos), works toward providing the spectator an 'ideal' and safe space within the frame of the stage: "the chorus [is] a living wall that tragedy pulls around itself to close itself off entirely from the real world and maintain the ideal ground and its poetic freedom" [Nietzsche, 37]. Tragedy requires stage separation which then allows the actual spectator to identify with the Greek chorus and become what Nietzsche calls an "Ideal Spectator," thus securely introduced onto the stage. The spectator's safety and the demarcation of the stage of representation are guaranteed by Nietzsche's alleged "reconciliation of the two adversaries," the "peace accord" between the Apollonius and Dionysus [Nietzsche, 20]. By securing the audience from the madness of the stage performance, this Greek "peace accord" prevents *pathos* from pouring itself onto the audience, and thus protects the spectator from contamination and the possibility of true insanity.

Yet it is too often forgotten that before the peaceful agreement between Apollonius and Dionysus, which Nietzsche famously calls as the inaugural event of the *Birth of Tragedy* and "the most important moment in the history of Greek religion," there was, he also reports, another non-Greek but *Barbarian* Dionysus [Nietzsche 20]. He notes that there is a "massive chasm that separates the Dionysiac Greeks from Dionysiac Barbarians." That 'chasm' is characterized by a degree of cruelty and animosity which, without the Apollonian inhibitory function, would shatter any possibility of representation and recognition by the civilized Greek [Nietzsche, 19]. If the Greek Dionysus conveys, in Attic Tragedy, primordial suffering as Oneness – a mysticism –, the Barbarian Dionysus expresses primordial suffering as an unimaginable violence

manifested as an irremediable ‘chasm’ within the field of representation itself. That ‘chasm’ describes a fundamental incompatibility between the civilized Greek God and the Barbarian God who, despite being ‘omnipresent’ in all cultures and countries, is associated more accurately, not with *tragic* mysticism, but with the *carnavalesque* animosity of the “Babylonian Sacaia and its throwback of man to the condition of the tiger and the ape” [Nietzsche 20]. Evidently, as the etymology of the word suggests, the ‘Barbarian’ is not civilized enough to participate in the Greek field of representation. Nietzsche insists that despite the “peace accord” and the conversion of the Greek Dionysus, “fundamentally, the chasm had not been bridged” [Nietzsche 20]. The Barbarian remains very much a present threat yet at the same time *cut out* from the field of representation of Greek Tragedy, due to being primarily non-Greek, which in Nietzschean terms means equally ‘non-German.’ Indeed even for Nietzsche the Barbarian Dionysus participates in the most unacceptable behaviors, exterior and prior to Nietzsche’s own cultural representational realm. As he puts it, during the Barbarian times, “the most savage beasts of nature were here unleashed, even the repellant mixture of love and cruelty that I have always held to be a ‘witch’s brew’” [Nietzsche, 19]. Aside from the sheer cruelty and animosity of the Barbarian God, which are deemed altogether non-Greek, one may infer that perhaps the most intolerable and horrendous element of the so called ‘witch’s brew’ simply consists in being a figure that is both *uncanny* and *foreign* to the conventional Greek imaginary.

But the disruptive power of the Barbarian Dionysus nonetheless operates *always already from within* the safe and illusory landmarks of the Greek field of representation. In his elaboration of the origins of Attic Theater, Nietzsche indeed stresses that for

Apollonius to sign the peaceful agreement with the newly *converted* Greek Dionysus, the Delphic god must acknowledge the already internal ‘impulses’ of the Greek culture that are susceptible to the cruelty of the ‘witch’s brew.’ Nietzsche writes that because of that pre-disposition, the “resistance [of Apollonius] became more questionable, even impossible, when *similar impulses emerged from the deepest roots of Greek culture*. Now all the Delphic god could do was to disarm his powerful opponent of his destructive weapon by effecting a timely reconciliation – the most important moment in the history of Greek religion” [Nietzsche, 19-20, *my emphasis*]. In other words, Greek tragedy, as we know it, was founded because of a *lack of resistance* to its pre-existing Barbaric ‘impulses,’ the Greek representational realm consisting in a fragile and unstable compromise in response to a grander and more primal cruelty. Attic Tragedy is based on an illusory and secondary mechanism that has come to negotiate such a fragile compromise, in place of the spectator, by means of the cathartic apparatus. “That terrible ‘witch’s brew’ of lust and cruelty had now lost its potency,” Nietzsche continues, underlining that only a mere few can recall the raw cruelty of the Barbarians: “only the peculiar blend and duality of emotions amongst the Dionysiac revelers recalls it, as medicine recalls a deadly poison – the phenomenon that pain is experienced as joy, that jubilation tears tormented cries from the breast. At the moment of supreme joy, we hear the scream of horror or the yearning lamentation for something irrevocably lost” [Nietzsche, 20]. What Nietzsche seems to indicate here recalls on the one hand Freud’s earlier depiction of the spectator’s experience before the sacrifice of the goat, which instead of being cathartic is one of *masochistic pleasure*, “pain experienced as joy,” as Nietzsche puts it. In a more radical vision, on the other hand, contrary to Freud,



Nietzsche does not allow for a model of perception in the theater based on unconscious *repression* (or *neurosis*), but rather on impulses that refer, as he puts it, to “something irrevocably lost,” i.e. psychotic foreclosure of a ‘primary scene.’

The ‘psychopathic’ theater is therefore endemic to tragedy from its “deepest roots”: the entire form of theater suffers from a dormant, pre-disposition to a mimetic ‘dis-ease,’ which drama struggles to resist and cover up. As we are about to see, this infirmity in mimetic representation and dramatization allows for what Artaud calls, not communication, but a “nervous magnetism” or a “psychic contagiousness” between stage and spectators.

Artaud famously opens *le Théâtre et son double* by articulating the process of interplay in the theater while revisiting the notorious event of the epidemic of the plague in Marseille, in 1720. As he reports from claimed historical sources, a trade ship accountable for bringing the plague to Marseille was due to dock, twenty days prior to that event, in the city of Cagliari, in Sardinia. But, it happens that the previous night, the viceroy of Sardinia dreams of the ship’s arrival at Cagliari and sees, in his sleep, the plague invade his territory and decimate his people. Artaud reports the events of the following day: « Un navire absent de Beyrouth depuis un mois, le *Grand-Saint-Antoine*, demande la passe et propose de débarquer. C’est alors qu’il [le vice-roi] donne l’ordre fou, un ordre jugé délirant, absurde, imbécile et despotique par le peuple et par tout son entourage. Dare-dare, il dépêche vers le navire qu’il présume contaminé la barque du pilote et quelques hommes, avec l’ordre pour le *Grand-Saint-Antoine* d’avoir à virer de bord tout de suite, et de faire force de voiles hors de la ville , sous peine d’être coulé à

coups de canon. »<sup>99</sup> The ship is chased away by orders of the viceroy, which are perceived by everyone to be *mad*.

Now, addressing the audience of the Sorbonne in 1933, Antonin Artaud's rendition of that story comes to exceed the facts, re-enacting for the historians the same madness previously accredited to the viceroy. In his talk, Artaud claims that the plague was, in fact, already present in Marseille *prior* to the docking of *le Grand-Saint-Antoine*, in what he describes as a *latent* state of the disease, which in turn waited for the arrival of the ship to become *activated* and begin its massacre: « *le Grand-Saint-Antoine* n'apporta pas la peste à Marseille. Elle était là. Et dans une période de particulière recrudescence. Mais on était parvenu à en localiser les foyers » [Artaud, TP 510]. In Artaud's vision, the city of Marseille was waiting for the trade ship – whether infected by the oriental plague or not – to dock on his port so that the already contaminated street walls spread the disease upon its people, thus becoming *ostensibly* a city infested by the plague. The historical inaccuracy and improbability of this coincidence – a city becoming ostensibly ravaged by the plague upon the arrival of an infested ship, yet without absolutely any causal connection or contamination – has no value in regard to Artaud's address at the Sorbonne. For as we are about to see, the *theatricality* of this statement bears witness, as the viceroy's dream, to a *latent* state of madness which Artaud, in his address at the Sorbonne, makes a point of acting-out, or rather re-activating. Artaud's own address does not invoke a logical discourse but a predisposition to a “psychic contamination” as described in the story of the viceroy:

---

<sup>99</sup> Antonin Artaud, “Le Théâtre et la peste,” in *Théâtre et son Double*, in *Œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004, 510, hereafter referred to as Artaud TP.

*le Grand-Saint-Antoine* qui passe à une portée de voix de Cagliari, en Sardaigne, n'y dépose point la peste, mais le vice-roi en recueille en rêve certaines émanations ; car on ne peut nier qu'entre la peste et lui ne soit établie une communication pondérable, quoique subtile, et il est trop facile d'accuser dans la communication d'une maladie pareille, la contagion par simple contact. [Artaud TP 511]

And to make his talk resonate with even more insanity to historians and scientists, yet with more sensibility to the nerves of his audience, Artaud adds the following statement, where the unexpected pronoun 'on' functions on a different level than its common use:

Quels que soient les errements des historiens ou de la médecine sur la peste, je crois qu'on peut se mettre d'accord sur l'idée d'une maladie qui serait une sorte d'entité psychique et ne serait pas apportée par un virus. Si l'on voulait analyser de près tous les faits de contagion pesteuses que l'histoire ou les Mémoires nous présentent, on aurait du mal à isoler un seul fait véritablement avéré de contagion par contact. [Artaud TP 511]

Whatever happened in that conference room at the Sorbonne, on April 6<sup>th</sup> 1933, there was, as testifies the peculiarity of this pronoun 'on,' an inter-action between madmen rather than scholars: this talk conjured up into one single address the multiple voices of a viceroy, tens of thousands of victims of an epidemic, and Artaud himself. If the *psychic contamination* were to happen in that room between Artaud and the members of his

audience, it would be so on the condition that each individual would re-enact the dream of the viceroy: i.e. the encounter of a particular affect that belonged to someone else.

In the case of the viceroy, the psychic contamination occurred while being affected from the particular position of the viceroy of Sardinia by a plague that, says Artaud, belonged to and already existed in the city of Marseille. Artaud himself states the required conditions for such contamination: it is, he says, the dimensions of the viceroy's "petite ville" that makes him sensitive to the advent of the plague (« ses responsabilités réduites de monarque l'avaient peut-être sensibilisé aux virus les plus pernicioeux » [Artaud TP 510]). One infers that the viceroy of Sardinia was indeed *sensitive* to the health of his "petite ville" precisely because Cagliari could be but *envious* of the dimensions of the great city of Marseille. Whether he was indeed aware of this envy or not, the viceroy was surrounded by stories of « tous ces bruits de peste qui couraient et ces miasmes d'un virus venu d'Orient » [Artaud TP 510], being as such pre-disposed to a paranoiac state of mind. Despite all these now articulated pre-dispositions, it is in a *dream* that the viceroy sees the plague and as a *madman* that he chases away the trade ship, without previous conscious decision-making. Thus, dreaming of seeing his city decimated *as if* he were the viceroy of Marseille, the viceroy of Sardinia became affected, twenty days in advance, by a fear that should have belonged to the viceroy of Marseille, though the latter had *not yet* come to feel it. In other words, the viceroy of Marseille was not susceptible to seeing the plague coming in his dreams at night because he was not *madly* envious and thus, could not be receptive to the dis-ease vicariously, from a position that did not belong to him in the first place.

This vicarious premonition gives a sense of what Artaud calls *psychic contamination* – or *plague* – as the condition of experiencing, not one's own object of repression, but another's affect which arises from being put in the position of enacting someone else's role. Artaud characterizes 'theatricality' as the recrudescence of one's latent affectivity impressed upon somebody else, as a way of reclaiming "the mind's perverse possibilities," instead of 'curing it' through catharsis: « Si le théâtre essentiel est comme la peste, ce n'est pas parce qu'il est contagieux, mais parce que comme la peste il est la révélation, la mise en avant, la poussée vers l'extérieur d'un fond de cruauté latente par lequel se localisent sur un individu ou sur un peuple toutes les possibilités perverses de l'esprit » [Artaud TP 520].

### **Valère Novarina: The Incomprehensible Mother Tongue**

“Le théâtre doit être le lieu où se détruit la littérature”

Valère Novarina

I have argued, until this point, that from Aristotle's canonical elaboration of mimesis, theater has undergone continual repression – even denial – of its primary function, which both disrupts and dissociates itself from dramatic representation and therapeutic catharsis. The scene of theater, as I have argued, takes place not on the actual stage but in a 'primal scene' which, while remaining unintelligible, opens up to the possibility to what Freud names "unconscious communication" or Artaud names "psychical magnetism." The call for the return of "neurosis" in the theater, or "the mind's perverse abilities," suggests that the theatrical process exceeds conscious strategies of stage representation and

recognition, and relies on the potentialities of what Artaud called “*une maladie de la pensée*.” The recurring notion of “*maladie*” is used here, as previously mentioned, apart from its clinical implications or opposition to “health.” “*Maladie*” rather invokes a primary state of vulnerability – or receptivity – present in every individual. Aside from being a threat to the individual’s mental “stability,” it allows for a primary mode of “communication” based mainly on notions of “affect” and “contamination.” As already established in Aristotle’s call to secure the cathartic apparatus of tragedy by means of dramatization and plot construction, speech is acknowledged as the theatrical medium that brings access to the ‘primal scene’ (the disruptive ‘*action*,’ ‘*life*’ itself, as Aristotle calls it) while it also threatens the autonomy of mimesis. In this capacity, theatrical speech becomes a carrying agent of affect, which shatters the safety of the stage boundaries, thus allowing for the possibility of “contamination.”

The current emergence of the so-called *le théâtre des paroles* establishes, more radically than ever before, the actual space of the theater as disruptive of the stage of representation. It relies mainly on a re-evaluation of the role of speech on stage, whose sole incantatory function resists strategies of representation. This speech conjures up, as we shall see, an unintelligible ‘primal scene.’ In the remaining of this chapter, I will examine the impact of that theater as inaugurated in the work of the French playwright Valère Novarina. Even though Novarina’s work for the stage is often deemed *unreadable*, for subscribing neither to plot, dramatization, characters, dialogue, or even the most basic elements of syntactic construction, I will argue here that his theater is in fact a manifestation, in an uncompromising way, of a theatricality already at work yet repressed in Western drama since Aristotle.

Valère Novarina, French writer and painter, is acclaimed by contemporary critics and scholars alike as the most notorious living figure of avant-garde theatrical writing in Europe. His ever-expanding, deliriously logorrheic body of work is claimed as a descendant of a long lineage of “basse littérature” (« J'évite toute pensée, je suis jeune et j'écris avec mon balai ! »).<sup>100</sup> Novarina overtly sides himself with writers such as Rabelais, experimental poets of the “fins de siècle” of less gravitas than Mallarmé, most particularly Artaud and the more contemporary figures of “*Art Brut*” such as Jean Dubuffet. In one of the first introductions to Novarina’s work in the English language, the translator Allen Weiss expands even further this genealogy:

These verbigerations, this logorrhea, though nonsensical and nonreferential, exists within an ancient yet thoroughly marginalized branch of literary history: that of the pure verbal fantasies and the irrational poetry of late Latin, deriving from hyperbolic modes of expression such as the *fatras*, *fatrasie*, *soties de menus-propos*, *coq-d-l'dne*, *galimatias*, *baguenaudes*, and on through the *amphigouris* of the 18th century. These terms describe various modalities and styles of word jumbles, satirical farces, parodies, gibberish, nonsense, and amphigories. The anglophone branch of this tradition culminates in Lewis Carroll's famous poem "Jabberwocky," though a vast amount of less well known but not necessarily lesser works exists. The major modernist francophone manifestation appropriating

---

<sup>100</sup> Valère Novarina, *Le Théâtre des paroles*, POL, 1989, p. 79, hereafter referred to as TP.

this tradition is the work of the contemporary French playwright Valère  
Novarina.<sup>101</sup>

Novarina resists even more than a number of his predecessors to the accepted rules of drama and mimetic art by dissociating theatrical writing from any clear possibility of ‘content.’ Echoing some of Artaud’s later so-called ‘*écrits bruts*’ or incantatory outbursts, which one may find for instance in “Artaud le Mômô,”<sup>102</sup> Novarina’s entire theatrical work challenges the basic rules of linguistic coherence, syntactic structure, or even more radically, lexical stability. Contrary to Artaud, however, whose writing *for* the theater was surprisingly at odds with his writing *on* the theater,<sup>103</sup> Novarina offers his so called ‘*écrits bruts*’ and seemingly endless ‘logorrhea’ to the physical actor on stage. He in fact argues that this questioning of language belongs first and foremost – and prior to its aesthetic implications – to the theatrical space, to the body of the actor, and to speech enacted on the stage. Connecting this work to the movement of ‘*Art Brut*,’ as Weiss did effectively in the above excerpt, seems indeed almost inevitable, given that this movement seeks to uphold, as Weiss puts it, “those rare, radically inventive or bizarre

---

<sup>101</sup> Allen S. Weiss « Mouths of Disquietude. Valère Novarina between the Theatre of Cruelty and *Écrits bruts* » in *The Drama Review*, 37. Summer 1993, p. 84, hereafter referred to as Weiss.

<sup>102</sup> It is noteworthy that Artaud’s so-called ‘*écrits bruts*,’ one of its most notorious instances appearing in *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*, are strictly *unrelated* to his theatrical writing and *not* intended for the stage.

<sup>103</sup> Artaud’s *Les Cenci*, *Tragédie en quatre actes et dix tableaux, d’après Shelley et Stendhal*, was the first and last play put on stage by Artaud’s theater group then called Théâtre de la Cruauté, in 1935. This was written and directed by Artaud himself, in an ostentatious and expensive production, intended to echo his theories on theater, but was oddly classical in both form and content, pertaining to tragic and noble characters, plot and storyline resonant with Racine among other classics, and did not survive more than 17 performances.



artistic works of people situated at the margins of culture: the mad, the isolated, the eccentric sided with handicap, clinical madness” [Weiss 82]. Whether Novarina himself does truly belong to such as category, thus subject to be diagnosed ‘clinically mad’ in his own right, or on the ‘margin of society,’ (he is, in fact, neither), is irrelevant regarding the impact of his work on Western drama and would run the risk of effectively ‘pathologizing’ this particular form of theater.

Novarina’s theatrical writing as the most powerful manifestation of *le théâtre des paroles*<sup>104</sup> functions radically as one of the adverse movements to Aristotelian tragedy on a number of levels. On its most elemental level, its writings and staging reconfigure the basic notions of *stage* and *spoken words* as non-instrumental to mimetic structures. As Novarina puts it in his (highly theatrical) writings *on* theater: « Je ne sais ni parler ni écrire, je suis infirme en parole et empêché en pensée. C'est le contraire d'une aisance, d'une maîtrise, le contraire d'un don. Qu'est-ce qu'un artiste ? Quelqu'un qui doit s'autogénérer, naître lui-même, naître seul, qui doit se fabriquer l'organe qui ne lui a pas

---

<sup>104</sup> What today is considered a new ‘genre’ under the label *le théâtre des paroles* still remains (necessarily) undefined and obscure. More specifically, it borrows its name from Novarina’s first collection of ‘theoretical’ texts on theater, which remain, as usual, utterly theatrical in its syntax and strongly resists any form of systematization. In the present section on Novarina, however, I try to underscore what I consider to be some important “themes” of Novarina’s take on theater, as they resonate with what I have argued to be a repressed ‘theatricality’ in Western drama, i.e. a tension between *speech* and *stage*. In more general terms, Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, Novarina’s first stage director and theater scholar, gives a possible ‘general’ definition of such a theater in these terms: « Un théâtre de la parole s'écrit ainsi indépendamment d'un théâtre de personnages, caractérisé aussi bien par sa rareté chez Samuel Beckett, que par son abondance chez Valère Novarina. [...] À force d'accueillir des paroles éparées ou des énoncés en déshérence, il arrive même que ces théâtres, sensibles aux effets de chœur, expulsent radicalement tout semblant de personnage et se passent de source émettrice figurée. [...] L'acteur ne peut plus prendre en charge de tels personnages selon les systèmes de jeu ayant cours, qu'ils visent à l'identification ou à des formes de distance. On le dit traversé par la parole. » Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, *Poétique du drame moderne et contemporain, Lexique d'une recherche* (Université de Paris III, Belgique, Louvain-la-neuve, 2001), pp. 88-9.

poussé. S'il est *doué*, si l'artiste est *doué*, c'est d'un manque. S'il a reçu quelque chose, c'est quelque chose en moins. » [TP, 107-108] Describing his theater as lacking, crippled, thus effectively situates it in the lineage of the *Art Brut*, as Weiss argues, or echoes Grotowski's "poor theater" in relying almost exclusively on the actor's speech and body rather than on the theatrical *machina* and stage constructions. Most importantly, it allows for a negative take on the traditional approach to theatrical writing, as the writer relies primarily on the function of speech *without* the possibility of discourse: a language deprived of its utilitarian function for the higher purpose of thought, or cognitive transmission of meaning between agents. This writing trims down language to its rawest material, allowing for the act of enunciation to operate separately from its function to generate systems of thought and communication.

In this configuration of theater, the stage becomes a space where the actor is defined solely as a 'speaking body' *prior* to its attributes as 'human being,' or even agent participating in an aesthetic genre: "[Le théâtre] ne concernait pas la littérature mais tous ceux qui parlent, tous les parlants, tous ceux qui un jour ou l'autre se sont servis de la parole ou seront amenés à s'en servir." [TP, 118-119]. In effect, Novarina considers the theater to be a space that divulges the actor in its most elemental state, in ways that life itself cannot: i.e. "a speaking animal" before its categorization as a "human." From this standpoint, *speech* is redefined in itself as a theatrical event, even when it occurs outside the theater and in 'real life,' as far as it is differentiated from communication and discourse. In this overall approach, speech defined as the act of enunciation is described as 'primitive' in ways that discursive language cannot be. It reveals – on stage – the human body in a 'truer' light than, say, science or medicine: "Faudra un jour qu'un acteur

livre son corps vivant à la médecine, qu'on ouvre, qu'on sache enfin ce qui se passe dedans, quand ça joue” [TP, 28].

From a bird’s eye point of view, Novarina’s writing for the stage broadly proceeds in successions of logorrheic tirades, or invectives, blended together without any declared logic, often borrowed from random discursive registers, such as medicine, physical science, law, politics, traffic news, or religion. These registers are bastardized and transformed into confused, nonsensical, often inarticulate outbursts, by an indefinite number of actors walking across the stage. These actors vomit endless lists of slogans, proverbs, or recite excerpts from imaginary texts sometimes with obscure theological overtones, void of contextual meaning. The opening of Novarina’s plays frequently consists in interminable lists of random numbers, followed by long successions of neologisms, hundreds of names of imaginary characters.

The over-production of neologisms and arbitrary numbers, – two prevailing elements of Novarina’s writing, which he calls “la passion néologique” and “la passion arithmétique” – reveal the truly ritualistic dimension of this *théâtre des paroles*. These acts of enunciation are indeed *voided* of any discursive content, and their sole function consists in putting the actor to the test of enunciation, words or numbers exhaled and dissociated from their signification, until the very limit of asphyxiation. In *L’Origine Rouge*, the actor Dominique Pinon notoriously exhales, in one single breath, the Formula of Time: “ $(a + b)^6 = a^6 + 6 a^5b + 15 a^4b^2 + 20 a^3b^3 + 15 a^2b^4 + 6ab^5 + b^6$  /  $(a + b)^8 = a^8 + 8 a^7b + 8 a^6b^2 + 8 a^5b^3 + 8 a^4b^4 + 8 a^3b^5 + 8 a^2b^6 + b^8 = (a + b)^8 = a^8 + 8 a^7a + 8 a^6a^2 + 8 a^5a^3 + 8 a^4a^4 + 8 a^3a^5 + 8 a^2a^6 + a^8$ , Voilà la formule du temps.”<sup>105</sup> This profusion of numbers effectively present the

---

<sup>105</sup> Valère Novarina, *L’Origine rouge*, POL, 2000, 200.

true sense of *urgency* in the act of enunciation, void of any communicable content. As Etienne Rabaté puts it: « Le nombre est une incantation magique pour évoquer le monde d'avant la chute, qui n'est que rythme ; on ne peut nommer, pense Novarina, seulement appeler, puisque le monde n'est plus ». <sup>106</sup> Novarina himself calls this form of incantation “la passion arithmétique,” seemingly privileging a profusion of *phone* to the detriment of *logos*, which he readily associates with his so-called “passion néologique.” Indeed his obsessions with numbers and neologisms are two overlapping passions. His ivy-like writing – and his entire corpus – is populated by an endless multiplication of names: 282 characters in the *Babil des classes dangereuses*; 93 names for the wives of Worbert Robic and 1111 invented names of birds in *le Discours aux animaux*; 115 names of herbs in *Je suis*; 1708 names of rivers in *La Chair de l'homme*; 2587 drawings for the named characters of *le Drame de la vie*. The stage directions, the *didascalies*, most of the time equally suffer from these passions: they remain hectic and, quite simply put, impossible to stage, or not intended for staging. It is difficult to overestimate – even imagine without being confronted to it – the productive drive behind Novarina’s writing, operating both on the syntactical and the lexical level, which no longer allows a structural distinction between what are accepted as *common words* and *proper names*. Here, for instance, is an extensive quote of a single stage direction consisting in a list of proper names, borrowed from the first pages of Novarina’s first published work for the theater, *Le Drame de la vie*, from 1984:

---

<sup>106</sup> Etienne Rabaté, *Le Nombre vain de Novarina*, in Valère Novarina *Théâtre du Verbe*, ed. Alain Berset, Librairie José Corti, Paris, 2001, 4. As we will see very shortly, « le monde d'avant la chute » escaping referential discourse is explicitly the garden where Adam, the first man, spoke before the creation of the world, and importantly before even the birth of Eve “cut out” from Adam’s body.

*Le théâtre est vide. Entre Adam.*

ADAM. – D'où vient qu'on parle? Que la Viande s'exprime?

*Il sort. Entrent l'Homme de Pontalambin, l'Homme de Lambi, Jean Membret, Sapolin, l'Homme de Saporléolimasse, Bandru, l'Homme de Pontagre, Bomberre, l'Homme de l'Hostie, Bandre, le Jeune de Bombière, les Hommes de l'Equipe Logique, Landrabe, Sapor Landret, Pénétral de Science, l'Homme de Pontagre, le Jeune de Science, l'Homme de Tuyau, le Lanceur Semnique, le Docteur Mâchefer, le Docteur Culemane, Formulateur Andret, Jean Trou Verbier, Saint Métronon, Jean Trou qui Verbe, Saint Blanc Scarpie, l'Homme de Maclumerde, Docteur Légiste, l'Enfant Capitaine, le Doc de Bioge, Ominibus, Jean Ravagine, Saint Sabonet, Saint Ecusson, Autrui, l'Homme de Stalingre, l'Ontogène, l'Homme de Bombe, Sapoléon, Jean le Gaz, l'Homme de Protet, l'Enfant Sézée, Samson Glapi, Homme Vénérien, Laborblédon, Papus Lochon, Trou d'Uf, Thibard, Homme Sapoli, Caïn du Tube, Mont de Vienne, Trou de Vienne, l'Infirmier Turban, Nombière, l'Homme de Maximogène, le Trou Miam, Vignole, Pilâtre, Serminier, l'Homme de Latrin, l'Aigle de Pontamousson, l'Aigle de Bioge, Trou Hutin, Nordilinoque, Verge à Sapolet, Ambius, Labius, Jérôme Carein, l'Homme de Dunlop, Charmant Glodon, Pétrule, Sutur, Gisèle Obret, Pétron, Péridon, l'Homme de Suripot, le Sextupède, Ombrede d'Ebron, le Septomane, l'Encordéon Bocard, le Recteur Bochardy, Scaphaire, Trophème, Saporigène, Homo Automaticus, Hautomaticus, Omo Onomaticus, le Docteur Bouché, le Docteur de Vérité, le Chien Ultron, l'Homme de Macabère, Blodon, le*

*Recteur Humain, l'Homme du Bodinien, Dalle, Anton, Uzedent, Jean  
l'Enclumeur, Doc Vorasson, le Germe, Jean Bocardi, l'Homme de Chatou, le  
Capitaine de Bo, Jean Viande, Tibal, Madame Cada, Tiode, Féciel, Pantalacar,  
Polimier, l'Homme de Niceps, le Gaz, l'Homme de Défunt, Docteur Sacrim, Doc  
Mélodon, Docteur Mercul Eléphantier, Machulet, Santab, l'Entier, l'Homme  
Machulé, Braguette, Asper, Mélandron, Nepton, le Cycloptère, le Sourd,  
Dragolini, le Chirurgien de Chair, Amalec, Membré, le Porteur Génicien, le  
Porteur Généré, l'Ambule de Panture, Morimonde, [...] <sup>107</sup>*

In view of such a profusion, it is not surprising that Novarina's plays, no matter how amorphous and erratic, last between two to three hours. Comparable to the actor's work on stage, the act of writing reveals to be equally a true *performance*: less in the *artistic* sense of the term, and more in line with the French definition that puts emphasis rather on

---

<sup>107</sup> Novarina continues: “[...] *Miloget, Ludul, Rachul, Jean Cadavre, Basculet, l'Homme de Bron, l'Homme de Bozon, Pontard, l'Enfant de Tio, DocMercien, Viandé, Docteur Autrou, Gothaire, Docteur Autrui, Unus, Lunub, Umous, le Censeur Lupidon, l'Acteur Trimestre, Fantol, Déo, Zébedé, Régulon, Jean Géon, l'Homme Sapolé, Sapor Tripon, Saint Jean Matié, Nichère Bobichon, La Pilotière, Uri, la Scanderblade, le Docteur Profond, Vilette, l'Homme de Valvarine, Trou Iambé, l'Homme de l'Andre, Tronçon Vergique, l'Homme d'Autruie, Cladet Buron, Mélechtonique, Morçon Jambique, Glady's Minor, Trou Vocager, Lobot Amné, Louise, Ada Kunz, Emma Djucke, Philippot, le Charmantier Luigi Bogère, l'Homme Comestible, les Génitrés, l'Ancien Palabrais, l'Enfant Sucret, l'Homme de Malheur, l'Andron Avant, la Terce, le Mort, Sermon Femnique, Tronc Caputin, Lindex, l'Anglais, le Cycloniste, le Vénandret, Trône du Salpêtrier, Dorcet, Capulle, Vorté, l'Homme de Nitron, Exécution, Pantalon Frise, Tronc du Vocal, Formant du Viande, Gallus, Amnins, le Porc, Docteur Scapin, Sargon Tamié, Rambusse, Jandet, Gigolini, Vociférié, Son Gendarme, Aton, Revet, Dalto, Craton, le Boubre, l'Ambulancier Santon, Corps Sénaton, Madame Sperme, Son Balai, Landron, Acton, Jardon, Ontru, Sénétratrice. Ils embrassent le Trou de Science et sortent. Entre un chien.” Valère Novarina, *le Drame de la vie*, Paris, POL, 1984, 2-4.*

an achievement of the *athletic* type, a truly physical outdoing, an outperformance of one's own known limitations to the point of exhaustion, almost *asphyxiation*.

By challenging the limits of what is accepted as possible or predictable, speech brings both the actor and the writer to his or her death(s), reaching a point where self-mastery and controlled enunciation – knowledge of one's own limitations and abilities – are made impossible. During the time of the theatrical 'performance,' the actor both *precedes* and *survives* himself or herself as a 'human being,' while being executed on stage through the act of *speaking*.<sup>108</sup> The actor goes through a series of (little) deaths, as his or her function becomes quite explicitly achieving only three things: « jouir, défequer, et mourir » [TP, 33]. These three achievements describe states in which the 'self' is no longer an active agent.

It is noteworthy that, while being a result of Novarina's singular 'passions' (neologism, arithmetic, and *emptied* speech altogether), the notion of 'defecation' as both disruptive *and* transformative of its active agent remains particularly close to Artaud's notorious "Recherche de la fécalité."<sup>109</sup> Like Artaud, Novarina assimilates the categorical notions of '*être*' and '*œuvre*' to that of '*excrement*,' and the 'putting to death' of the actor on stage to the act of 'defecation.' The act of defecation (i.e. evacuation or rejection of the byproduct) becomes here an accurate description of the act of speaking itself. As Novarina puts it: « Ce sont les mêmes muscles du ventre qui, pressant boyaux ou

---

<sup>108</sup> "L'acteur n'exécute pas mais s'exécute, interprète pas mais se pénètre, raisonne pas mais fait tout son corps résonner" [TP 32].

<sup>109</sup> « Là où ça sent la merde, ça sent l'être./ L'homme aurait très bien pu ne pas chier. Ne pas ouvrir la poche anale. Mais il a choisi de chier ! Comme il aurait choisi de vivre ! Au lieu de consentir à vivre mort.../C'est que pour ne pas faire : caca ! Il lui aurait fallu consentir à ne pas être. Mais il n'a pas pu se résoudre à perdre l'être ! C'est à dire à mourir vivant. » Artaud, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*, Quarto, 1644.

poumons, nous servent à déféquer ou à accentuer la parole. Faut pas faire les intelligents, mais les dents, les mâchoires au travail » [TP, 11]. The spoken words, the written text, the painted canvas, or any form of created object, is considered – quite literally – as *shit*. The work of art is worth (as the name suggests) *nothing*. As Derrida notes in his reading of Artaud, the work of art is worthless for being *dead material*, « l'œuvre, comme excrément, n'est que matière : sans vie, sans force ni forme » [Derrida ED 273]. The prevalence of the creative *act* over the *work* or *object* of art comes from its *inimitability* and singularity as a true 'event,' whose lack of self-identity and repeatability escapes permanent inscription. For Artaud, « il faut en finir avec cette superstition des textes et de la poésie écrite » [TD], which does not mean that we must do without the *act* of writing. Derrida notes that Artaud's quest translates in an *affirmation* of art-making *without* the work of art: it is « art sans œuvre » [Derrida ED 273].

For Novarina as for Artaud, the excrement is worthless in itself as it remains a mere trace of the *act* of defecation. The singularity of the generative act, which Artaud almost exclusively associates with 'theater,' prevails without compromise over the generated object of art. As he writes in "*Pour en finir avec les chefs-d'œuvre*":

Laissons aux pions les critiques de textes, aux esthètes les critiques de formes, et reconnaissons que ce qui a été dit n'est plus à dire ; qu'une expression ne vaut pas deux fois, ne vit pas deux fois ; que toute parole prononcée est morte et n'agit qu'au moment où elle est prononcée, qu'une forme employée ne sert plus et n'invite qu'à en rechercher une autre, et que le théâtre est le seul endroit au monde où un geste fait ne se recommence pas deux fois. [Artaud, TD, Quarto 550]



This principle of the prevalence of the creative act over the created object may be found in Artaud's axiom defining the creative act as « une protestation perpétuelle contre la loi de l'objet créé. »<sup>110</sup> According to this principle, the creative *act* – or art-making – works against the *laws* that define the object *as* object of art, and therefore against the very concept of art as a category or definite form. While the created object is instituted by means of a series of laws defining it *as* object, we may derive from Artaud's axiom that those laws are equally byproducts of the generative function of the creative act. The inaugural violence inherent to creation must thus precede and exceed the defined laws of the created object. In other words, the definition of art as a form defined by a set of laws and conventions is neither synchronous nor compatible with the inaugural act of creation, thus undermining altogether that originary moment.<sup>111</sup> Along these lines, the act of

---

<sup>110</sup> Artaud, *Textes écrits en 1947*, Quarto, 1467.

<sup>111</sup> The issue at stake is therefore both aesthetical and legislative. Through what process do conventions and laws become acknowledged as *new*, *unprecedented*, and therefore *unpredictable* at the moment of their creation? Derrida defines this double-bind and 'undecidable' moment of creation as "*une violence originaire*" or "*une performativité originaire*": « Cette performativité originaire [...] ne se plie pas à des conventions préexistantes, comme le font tous les performatifs analysés par les théoriciens des *speech acts*, mais [...] la forme de rupture produit l'institution ou la constitution, la loi même, c'est-à-dire aussi le sens qui paraît, qui devrait, qui paraît devoir le garantir en retour. *Violence* de la loi avant la loi et avant le sens, violence qui interrompt le temps, le désarticule, le démet, le déplace hors de son logement naturel » (Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi*, Paris, Galilée, 1994, 60). The question here does not merely concern the chronology in the process of creation, and its inherent 'undecidability,' but whether the creative act preceding the conventions that defines it – *after the event* – as 'art-making' may be categorized as truly an 'aesthetic' act. Or does the originary violence of that act forbid such a retroactive re-appropriation. As Derrida skillfully examines the logic of the notion of 'invention,' it becomes clear that if an object of 'invention' were predictable and well defined at the moment of its making, it would not in fact be truly an 'invention' at all, but rather a programmed repetition of some past objects. The creative act, which relates indeed to the notion of 'speech act' in Derrida's singular definition, must necessarily be at once *unprecedented*, *unpredictable*, and *indefinable*:

---

Structure singulière, donc d'un événement, car l'acte de parole dont je parle doit être un événement : dans la mesure de sa singularité d'une part, et pour autant que, d'autre part, cette unicité fera venir ou advenir quelque chose de nouveau. Il devrait faire ou laisser venir le nouveau d'une première fois. Autant de mots, le « nouveau », l'« événement », le « venir », la « singularité », la « première fois » (« *first time* » où le temps se marque dans une autre langue sans le faire dans une autre) qui portent tout le poids de l'énigme. Jamais une invention n'a lieu, jamais elle ne se dispose sans quelque événement inaugural. Ni sans quelque avènement, si l'on entend par ce dernier mot l'instauration pour l'*avenir* d'une *possibilité* ou d'un *pouvoir* qui restera à la disposition de tous. Avènement, car l'événement d'une invention, son acte de production inaugurale doit, une fois reconnu, une fois légitimé, contresigné par un consensus social, selon un système de conventions, valoir *pour l'avenir*. Il recevra son statut d'invention, d'ailleurs, que dans la mesure où cette socialisation de la chose inventée sera garantie par un système de *conventions* qui lui assurera du même l'inscription dans une histoire commune, l'appartenance à une culture : héritage, patrimoine, tradition pédagogique, discipline et chaîne des générations. L'invention commence à pouvoir être répétée, exploitée, réinscrite. [Jacques Derrida, *Psyché, Inventions de l'autre*, Galilée (édition augmentée), 1998, 16].

Caught in between the double necessity of being unprecedented and recognizable, upsetting the given conventions while being still *acknowledged* by them *as art*, the invented *object* still differs from the inaugural *act* of invention as far as the latter is never inscribed, and must remain, to some extent, *unrecognizable*: « Toute invention suppose que quelque chose ou quelqu'un vienne une *première fois*, quelque chose à quelqu'un ou quelqu'un à quelqu'un, et qui soit *autre*. Mais pour que l'invention soit une invention, c'est à dire *unique*, même si cette unicité doit donner lieu à la répétition, il faut que cette première fois soit aussi une dernière fois » [Jacques Derrida, *Psyché*, 16]. It is not arbitrary that Derrida's analysis of the process of 'invention' also comments on Austin's Speech Act theories, but resonate as well a great deal with Saussure's dilemma on the now celebrated and complex relationship between 'language' (*langage*) and 'speaking' (*parole*). Indeed language translates for Saussure not merely as a structure or register of signs, but also as 'conventional practices,' while the *act* of speaking allows for those linguistic structures to come into being (the so-called 'conventions' of language rely fundamentally on their everyday usage, i.e. enactment through speech, or else would disappear). Even more relevant to our discussion is that Saussure comes to differentiate between *individual* and *social* speech acts. While the latter strengthens the 'conventions' through speech used for social interactions, the former runs always the risk of being thrown aside as being, in effect, too singular, or precisely too 'unconventional': "We must leave the individual act, which is only the embryo of speech, and approach the social fact./ Among all the individuals that are linked together by speech, some sort of average will be set up: all will reproduce, not exactly but approximately – the same signs united with the same concepts. [Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1959, 13]. The *embryonic* dimension of speech, occurring on the level of the individual, clearly participates in the ratification or even transformation of language in being part of a whole social group. But at the same

speaking *must necessarily* exceed the laws of structural linguistics, discourse, and communication, for the sole reason that these laws exist only by virtue of the fact that speaking has *already* occurred prior to them. As a consequence, Artaud and Novarina remind us here that *the act of speaking is by nature always inarticulate*.

This double-bind underscores the ineffaceable trace of the violence underlying the act of enunciation, which survives the originary moment and continually interferes with the spoken words, forbidding their permanent inscription in signifying structures. In fact, Artaud may assist us even further in our reading of Novarina, as he seemingly imposes himself as a precursor to today's so-called *théâtre des parole*. Artaud's description of the inarticulate element of enunciation – the originary violence inherent in speaking – translates in a private (mute) tongue being forced into the public sphere of communicative discourse. For Artaud, the paradigm of theatrical speech takes the form of a (pre-linguistic) cry, a scream (*cri*), which he also called an “intellectual cry”: « Je pense à la vie. Tous les systèmes que je pourrai édifier n'égalent jamais mes cris d'homme occupé à refaire sa vie. [...] / Ces forces informulées qui m'assiègent, il faudra bien un jour que ma raison les accueille, qu'elle s'installent à la place de la haute pensée, ces forces qui du dehors ont la forme d'un cri. Il y a des cris intellectuels, des cris qui

---

time, the individual speech may remain far too idiosyncratic, singular, or precisely ‘inventive’ for being recognizable, and thus becomes excluded from the ‘average’ reception that establishes linguistic conventions, leaving therefore *no repeatable inscription* for future generations. Accordingly, the very structure of *speaking* must necessarily allow for such idiosyncrasy – in order to be qualified as an *individual* act – and therefore always run the risk of complete erasure. Derrida's notion of ‘invention’ being at once a ‘first time’ and a ‘last time,’ Artaud's ‘intellectual cry’ and Novarina's theatrical speech, all confirm indeed that the *act* of speaking must be, in principle, *inarticulate*.

proviennent de la  *finesse*  des moelles. C'est cela, moi, que j'appelle, la Chair. »<sup>112</sup>

Artaud's haunting cries are heard  *as*  cries only in the  *public*  sphere, in the ears of those who are  *not*  the crying individual. According to Artaud, for he who utters the cries, they remain 'intellectual' and, if not 'intelligible' nevertheless worthy of replacing «  *la haute pensée*  »: they are the outer manifestation of something that functions as an inner  *mute language* .

Although affected by the event of Artaud's writing, Novarina's speech dissociates itself from the so-called "intellectual cry." What Novarina calls his "neologistic" or "arithmetic" passion, (he equally speaks of "pneumatic gymnastics,") is, for one, far more cheerful, blissful,  *jouissif* , than Artaud's terrorizing cry, or Beckett's aphasic murmur. Also different is that Novarina's texts are truly ever expanding, ivy-like, and his plays seem to many as almost interminable. And no matter how words are disempowered and incapable of expressing what he calls the "mute language," he is adamant that there is nothing else at his disposal to express it than words alone: "Si les mots nous mènent près du langage muet et meurent, ça ne veut pas dire du tout qu'il y ait échec de la parole, impuissance des mots, pas du tout: les mots simplement nous mènent au mystère et meurent, naturellement brûlés par nos souffles. Ils meurent de nous dire  *ce dont on ne peut parler* . Eux seuls le disent, non le silence sans voix."<sup>113</sup> In contrast to Artaud, Novarina maintains that the "mute language" hindering the intelligibility of spoken words cannot entirely rid itself of them: no wordless cry may convey the idiosyncrasy of the mute tongue. The violence of the linguistic  *void*  at the origin of language, which both

---

<sup>112</sup> Antonin Artaud, A.Artaud, "Position de la Chair," in  *Oeuvres* , Gallimard Quarto, 2004, 146.

<sup>113</sup> Valère Novarina,  *Devant la parole* , POL, 1999, 29, hereafter referred to as DP.

institutes language and continuously dismantles it from within, is repeatedly revived, paradoxically, through words alone.

These characteristics of speech equally affect the visual apparatus of the stage. As far as speech presents us with something that may *not* be spoken, the stage similarly offers to us a space that is *not* visible, *not* representable. In fact, speech is solely responsible for erasing the stage from our field of vision, “[les acteurs] protestant contre l'espace en parlant” [TP 192]. The stage of this theater, “c’est une scène qu’on ne peut jamais voir” [TP 107]. The notion of *le théâtre des paroles* presupposes indeed an inability of the stage to become a scopic or specular apparatus. In recognition of the tension we previously examined between *speech* and *stage* in the history of Western theater, this theater presents *la scène de la parole* as a space being *opened up* by speech: it is an incantatory appeal to a ‘primal scene’ that resists the visibility of the stage, and is conjured up by “l’espace vide entre les mots” [DP 18]. As Novarina suggests, it is a spacing (*espacement*) of the scopic structure of the stage, while the moving structures of speech – similar to a shifting architecture – make the eyes sensitive to an *empty space*: “Au théâtre, visiblement, la phrase agit aussi par la voie qu’elle n’emprunte pas, par le tour qu’elle évite. C’est une édification du vide, comme l’architecture.”<sup>114</sup> Novarina’s theater impels us to *see nothing* through *spoken words*: the originary *hole* of the stage conjured up by speech, which is, as we shall see, an invocation of the mute *infans*, as Novarina’s incantation already signals: “Entrez, enfants doués d’obscurité, vous qui vous savez nés de l’obscurité, venez! Venons, assistons ensemble à la levée du trou. Car le

---

<sup>114</sup> Valère Novarina, “L’homme hors de lui, » in *Europe*, N 880-881/Août-Septembre 2002, 172.

théâtre n'est sur scène rien d'autre que la représentation d'un trou. Voilà l'idée à creuser.”  
[TP 163].

Rather than being dismissed as immanent and tautological speech, the theater's inability to refer to anything other than its own event is transformed into a conjuration of a scene more *primary* than the field of representation: it subscribes to a (non-)category (to borrow a term from Jean-François Lyotard) of 'tautegorical' (affect) phrase. It is speech referring to *nothing*, while becoming instead a *signal*, solely by way of its *happening*, of the occurrence of a past 'trauma,' inasmuch as 'trauma' cannot (by principle) be inscribed in a discursive system and be therefore *recalled* once again on stage. Lyotard famously names this event the 'affect phrase,' which acknowledges a non-discursive use of language that signals, without saying or deictic reference, the inarticulate stage of infancy. As Lyotard puts it: « Ce temps d'avant le *logos* s'appelle *infantia*. Il est celui d'une *phônè* qui ne signifie que des affections, des *pathémata*, des plaisirs et des peines de maintenant, sans le rapporter à un objet pris comme référent ni à un couple destinateur-destinataire. »<sup>115</sup> *La parole* in this theater differentiates itself from discourse (*logos*) in searching for what Lyotard calls the *phônè*, and we may call “the infancy of language,” or “the infant tongue.” This stage (*stade*) of infancy operates prior to signifying structures and relies primarily on rhythm, through the spacing (*l'espacement*) of words, as Novarina puts it:

Toute bonne pensée se danse, toute pensée vraie doit pouvoir se danser. Parce que le fond du monde est rythmé. Parce que le fond du monde, parce que le socle qui est visible à l'intérieur est un noyau comique de rythmes puisés. Comique parce

---

<sup>115</sup> Lyotard, “La phrase-affect. D'un supplément au Différend,” in *Misère de la philosophie*, Paris: Galilée, 2000, 53.

que le monde - parce que tout le monde - a été fait par *un enfant en riant*. L'acteur le sait : que tout était rythmique primitivement. Lui seul pourrait, s'il le pouvait, dire tout hautement que le fond du monde est un son. Un son dont on peut dire le nom, un son *ut*, qui est un son dont on ne peut dire le nom. [TP 199-200, my emphasis]

Novarina requires the actor to create a space for the *infant tongue*, to put emphasis on the *phoné* as an attempt to return to the primal, unintelligible, and invisible scene/stage of infancy. Each time Novarina's actor walks on stage, he says: « J'ai avancé aujourd'hui vers ma naissance encore un peu. » [TP 205].

In a recent publication, « Une Langue maternelle incompréhensible » in *l'Envers de l'esprit*, Novarina assimilates the birth of his writing to a “scene” from his childhood: in the absence of his father, he sits by his mother's side next to the piano and listens to her singing a Hungarian song. The mother in fact does not know Hungarian: she is simply repeating from memory a phonetic approximation of a song originally written for her by her first lover, a Hungarian man named Istvan. The child's encounter with this foreign maternal tongue – his mother's deformed and idiosyncratic Hungarian – seems to be here paradigmatic of Novarina's entire approach to ‘theatrical writing,’ as this experience presents itself as a the origin of the drives for incantatory prayers, “la passion arithmétique,” “la passion néologique,” and the prevalence of rhythm over meaning: « Ma mère ne savait de hongrois que les chiffres, cette chanson d'Istvan et le Notre Père. Les paroles de la chanson devenaient de moins en moins sûres - elle continuait cependant à nous la chanter avec grande confiance, mais dans une sorte de hongrois à la dérive,

presque une langue en perdition. » [EE 179] Istvan was deported and died in Auschwitz before the birth of Valère. The writer recalls this scene and the Hungarian song which his mother used to sing during her husband's absence: « elle me disait tout à la fois que j'aurais pu être hongrois, être juif et ne pas être — puis qu'Istvan était mort en déportation avant ma naissance. »<sup>116</sup> He continues: « Le hongrois devint *ma* langue étrangère — peut-être même ma langue véritable : celle que j'aurais parlée si j'avais été le fils d'Istvan, “le fiancé fantôme.” Une rêverie négative s'est secrètement développée à partir de là : le hongrois incompréhensible de ma mère était ma langue manquante, l'ombre de la langue que j'aurais pu parler si je n'avais pas existé. » [EE 180]. This maternal complicity, illicit to the eyes of the absent father, confronts the child to what Novarina calls “une langue maternelle incompréhensible,” an “amneotic tongue.” Aside from being utterly idiomatic and unique to the mother's history, this tongue suggests the possibility of a radically *other* phantasmatic genealogy, positing the possibility of the writer's absolute *annihilation*.

Confronted to his mother's song, the writer faces the possibility of *death by seduction*, as Ulysses before the sirens, his native French language drawn to its radical other and threatened to turn mute entirely. The obsession Novarina develops toward the “sorority” between French and Hungarian establishes the mother's idiomatic “Hungarian” as a third, rhythmic, linguistically defunct tongue, underlying both languages:

En entendant sans comprendre, en « creusant d'oreille », je finis par apprivoiser peu à peu la singularité absolue de cet hapax linguistique en Europe et perçus

---

<sup>116</sup> Valère Novarina, *l'Envers de l'esprit*, POL, 2009, 179, hereafter referred to as EE.



dans la langue hongroise une sorte de sororité mystérieuse avec le français; je repérais les sons semblables : le règne du *e* ouvert partout présent dans le hongrois où il est comme une basse continue, un bourdon toujours présent, et sa présence harmonique, enfouie tout au fond du français; je découvrais dans l'une et l'autre langue la surprenante richesse de l'éventail sonore -la même ouverture toute grande de la palette des phonèmes. Mais j'étais surtout frappé - dans l'une et l'autre langue, mais surtout dans le hongrois - par la platitude, le calme puissant des phrases, la portée du souffle, l'étendue des sons, le lac des voyelles, la longueur de la phrase se prolongeant jusqu'à une sorte de point d'orgue de la pensée. Hongrois et français s'étendent, s'épandent, se déversent : deux langues faites pour aller loin, pour aller profond - non par les soubresauts de l'accent tonique, mais par l'amplitude rythmique et la portée respiratoire. » [EE 184-185]

While the “sorority” of French and Hungarian brings out the mother’s “rhythmic” tongue, her idiomatic Hungarian cannot be ‘spoken’ on its own as a separate language: the sole true enunciation of this ‘incomprehensible mother tongue’ occurred only in those repeated sessions where she sang her unique and truly *inimitable* song. The condition of inimitability of the ‘maternal tongue’ subscribes to the definition of an ‘event’ in the strong sense of the term, whose place and time of occurrence can never be truly reproduced authentically, after the mother’s death. Yet for Novarina, the singularity of that event repeats itself inside the French language – *underneath* its signifying structures – where spoken words attempt to give room to this ‘mute’ and ‘rhythmic’ tongue, by way of being simultaneously enunciated and denied meaning. From both the dimensions of

enunciated speech and a child's manifested desire to recover maternal love, theatrical writing denotes the suspended moment of continual rebirth of speech, as though occurring repeatedly and each time for the first time:

Le hongrois (vu par un enfant) : une langue qu'il ne comprend pas et qu'il *voit chantée*. Une île du langage ; la langue à un ; une langue orpheline et une langue amniotique ; la langue qui ne résonne nulle part ; un corps devant soi ; une onde ; une langue dispensée du fardeau de la communication et qui nous rappelle à chaque instant — nous fait concrètement toucher, tout au fond du langage — au fond du son de chaque syllabe mordue, entendue, mâchée et bue, *notre premier étonnement de parler*. [EE 183, my emphasis]

*La scène* of Novarina's theater – overshadowing the writer both as artist *and* as subject – is thus 'primal' in a much more radical way than what the Freudian definition leaves us to think, given that the determining event in Novarina's *life* had occurred, not in his "early childhood," not even in his confrontation with his mother's song, but *prior* to his actual birth: by the time of Istvan's deportation and death in Auschwitz. This "*scène invisible*" and Novarina's "incomprehensible mother tongue," the *mute* infant tongue, escape the possibility of re-presentation and remembrance, if not for the sole reason that it quite literally does not belong to the realm of *lived experiences*. This radical break between the traditional notions of *scène* and *parole* thus confronts the theater to the *radical impossibility* of articulating and representing the event, as far as it was never inscribed in the narrative of the writer's auto-bio-graphy.

## Chapter 4

### **The End of Theory is Just the Beginning: of Blood in Jacques Derrida's *Circonfession***

The notion of 'theory' is closely bound to the problematic of 'theater,' as examined in the last chapter. 'Theoretical' articulation participates in different strategies of dramatization, narrative construction, and conceptual configuration, all contingent upon a complex process of mimetic abstraction elaborated in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Samuel Weber has argued, in his examination of theatricality as a medium, that 'theory' and 'theater' have all along suffered from a same primary *split*, which he identified as the "split in all mimesis." Accordingly, 'theoretical' thinking and 'theatrical' representation both rely, as he noted, on a scopic structure (that of the *Theatron*: from *Thea*, 'a place from which one sees'). That structure seeks to maintain a safe and unambiguous separation between, on the one hand, analytical discourse or mimetic abstraction, and on the other hand, the object undergoing inspection or representation. I will argue, in this chapter, that what we generally call 'theory' relies, alike drama, on a more *primary* process previously identified as 'theatricality,' which challenges altogether discursive clarity and systematic articulation. Because of this predisposition, 'theory' is bound to re-invent itself, without achieving discursive unity, against its own categorical laws, methodology, and systematic logic. In these terms, the notion of 'theory' must exceed its own categorization and

conceptualization, while suffering, to borrow from Derridian ‘terminology,’ from an “autoimmunity disorder” in regard to its own systematic elaboration.

In trying to reconcile ‘theatrical’ disarticulation with ‘theoretical’ discourse, my elaboration will rely primarily on a text most readers qualify, and sometimes disqualify, as the ‘intimate’ Derrida: *Circonfession*. By laboring through this text which refers to itself as “indecipherable,” I will attempt to rearticulate the mechanism of “theatricality” in Derrida’s singular idiomatic practice as a form of “confession,” which seeks to provoke not the avowal of any “truth,” but the unpredictable “conversion” or “writing” of an *event* impressed onto the body, outside the written manuscript.

But maybe, to begin with, one way of engaging with the question of “theatricality” in “theory” would simply amount to asking: What exactly is the *status* of this text, *Circonfession*? Is it ‘theoretical’ in the strict sense of the term? Which immediately follows up with the question: What is the *status* of “theory” today, after Derrida, after this text particularly, amid increasing calls in the humanities and universities to *end* its “area,” to move on, beyond, or at least, think *after* deconstruction?<sup>117</sup> Where does ‘theory’ end and what happens to it beyond those limits? Is the end of ‘theory’ also its death?

---

<sup>117</sup> These teleological claims emerged by the end of the last century and still continue today, after the founding figures of the so-called “New Criticism” have passed away. Those critiques of “theory” (which includes primarily the so-called French “post-structural” or “post-modern” theories) often base their rhetoric on “historical” and “economical” assessments of this so-called “discipline,” transformed into a brand or capital losing value on the academic job market, or becoming increasingly fragmented into smaller specialized branches, “deflated” in favor of more conservative schools of thought. The following excerpt, for instance, describes the general tone of such a rhetoric, from the introduction of an article from Jeffrey Williams called “The Death of Deconstruction, the End of Theory, and Other Ominous Rumors,” already dating from 1995: “In the late 1980s, something happened to deconstruction. As the story usually

Before engaging with the text itself, I would like to examine briefly the significance of a related event that took place after the fact: Jacques Derrida's recorded reading of *Circonfession*, in 1993, at the psychoanalyst Antoinette Fouque's invitation. This recording includes an introduction by the author, which to my knowledge has not been made available to the general public in any form other than the recording, for instance *in print* or *in writing*. In that introduction, Derrida speaks of the ordeal of reading out loud *Circonfession*, a text that maybe more than any other resists articulated speech, for reasons that we will soon examine. What Derrida accounts for in this introductory note, instead of a sense of vindication by the self-presence of his own voice

---

goes, deconstruction fell (from its predominant position on the theory market, a position it had gained, not without a great deal of debate and controversy, through the 1970s and early 1980s. It had been the blue chip stock of the theory market, the one-time IBM of the field. By the late 80s and through the early 1990s, though, there was a rash of pronouncements proclaiming the death of deconstruction and announcing its passing from the critical scene. As a feature article in the Chronicle of Higher Education dramatically reports, 'Devastating Developments Hastening the Demise of Deconstruction' (Shaw), and as a recent PMLA article declares, 'Deconstruction, it seems, is dead in literature departments today' (Nealon). And, as the story usually continues, deconstruction has been supplanted by the new historicism, neopragmatism, cultural studies, lesbian studies, personal criticism, and so on. In short, the market has carried on, moving on to new growth areas and hotter stocks./ To investigate exactly what happened to deconstruction, I'll sketch out a brief history." [Jeffrey Williams "The Death of Deconstruction, the End of Theory, and Other Ominous Rumors," *Narrative*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Jan., 1996), 17]. Such rumors have not fundamentally changed in recent years, despite prominent figures of second or third generations answering to the call to deconstruct these teleological reductions, redefining the now widespread notion of "After Derrida" to mean, rather than doing away with Derrida, opening up to the notion of a "theory to come" (vernacularly called "post-theory"). These new elaborations resonate with the Derridian injunction to avoid a programmed repetition of 'disciplines' or 'schools of thought,' but provide readings of the unpredictable course of "theory" as it labors through this new century, in view of the elaborations of such notions as "unpredictability," the "event," and the "to come." I argue here that the dynamism already set in place between the two texts by Geoffrey Bennington and Derrida in *Jacques Derrida*, bear witness to the call for the unpredictable "re-invention" of "deconstructive theory" as part of the very notion of "deconstruction."

– spectral to us, today, years after his passing away –, is the sense of *urgency* derived from the very resistance to articulation:

Jamais autant qu'à l'occasion des séquences que je vais tenter de dire à voix haute, dans la cabine de verre d'un studio, presque seul devant un micro, je n'avais senti l'impérieuse nécessité de la profération, sans doute en moi et hors de moi, mais aussi son impossibilité, le risque irrémédiable qu'elle fait courir à la phrase, et donc cette étrange alliance de ce qui est nécessaire, légitime, appelé sans doute, mais interdit. Ces longues phrases était déjà proférées en moi, sans doute, et plus d'une fois, comme appelées vers la haute voix, et pourtant elles perdent la voix dès que celle-ci leur arrive.<sup>118</sup>

The dual sense of urgency and impossibility is experienced – “more than ever before” – at the time of ‘speaking out’ *Circonfession*. Derrida defines this type of enunciation as “calling,” thus stretching the category of mere reading to that of incantation, conjuration, or prayer, which happens most powerfully at moment of reading « *à voix haute*. » The singularity of this calling, i.e. the act of enunciation, constitutes a double bind requiring impeccable articulation yet at the same time forbidding exactly that, thus accounting for an imminent resistance to verbalization. During the time of the reading, Derrida associates that resistance with « *le rythme et le souffle* », which, he adds, are always already inherent to the *act* of writing:

---

<sup>118</sup> Jacques Derrida, « introduction to *Circonfession* », in *Circonfession* [Doc. sonore]: *texte intégral lu par l'auteur*. Collection Des femmes (Bibliothèque des voix), 2005, 5 CD's (5h 35min), recording made in 1993.

Comme tous ceux qui écrivent, je suppose, et durant le temps qu'ils écrivent, je prononce en moi chaque mot, avant et après son inscription. En moi, c'est à dire à la fois en silence, à voix basse, et par simulation à voix haute, d'une hauteur simplement contenue, retenue, tenue au silence. Ce qui se met ainsi à l'épreuve de cette improbable diction, c'est surtout, non seulement mais surtout, le rythme et le souffle. [Derrida, recorded introduction to *Circonfession*]

The “improbability” of this diction, and the category of « *le rythme et le souffle* », bring *Circonfession*, as we shall see, into dialogue with a particular form of « *parole soufflée* » (a term Derrida coins in his reading of Artaud) and what he calls in this very text « *une langue crue* »: an utterly individual (and admittedly ‘unbelievable’) tongue underlying his ‘corpus,’ idiomatic to Jacques Derrida alone, yet always already stolen away by an invisible other. What Derrida describes as the infiltration of the private tongue into the public domain – i.e. in elliptical and “indecipherable” syntax inscribed in the field of “philosophical” or “theoretical” discourse – will demonstrate itself to be *inaugural* of the general structure of “theoretical” thinking.

### **The Hypertext**

In 1991, Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida published a joint volume entitled *Jacques Derrida*, in the collection *Les Contemporains*, Edition du Seuil. In the publisher’s opening note, the reader is informed that this joint work is based on a playful

and friendly pact, respecting the following rules: on the one hand, Bennington was to produce a “Derridabase,” i.e. a series of texts classified by key words aiming at articulating “pedagogically,” without *any* quotation from the original texts (only parenthetical page references), a theoretical “systematicity” in Derridean deconstruction, or more precisely « le système général de cette pensée » [JD 3]; on the other hand, Jacques Derrida was to produce a new text in response to Bennington’s so-called “hypertext,” but following the claim that deconstruction exceeds any methodology or system, thus “surprising” Bennington’s particular “machinistic” rendition of his work. The final rule of the contract states: « Il va de soit que G[oeffrey] B[ennington] n’avait pas le droit, pour essayer de rendre compte de ce nouveau texte, de refaire après coup son travail, qui – se dit-il après coup surpris – n’a été fait que pour provoquer et accueillir cette surprise » [JD 3].

Because of the very nature of this contract, *Circonfession* does not offer itself easily to “reading,” either by the author himself behind the microphone, or by Geoffrey Bennington as he “confesses” after the event to the being truly “surprised,”<sup>119</sup> or certainly

---

<sup>119</sup> In a paper entitled “Time – for the Truth” responding to Derrida’s *Circonfession* in parallel with a reading of a text on Augustine by Jean-François Lyotard, Bennington himself welcomes the ‘surprise,’ making a confession of his own: “My confession is this: I am, I fear, unable to read the texts I am to discuss today. Jacques Derrida’s ‘Circonfession’ and Jean-François Lyotard’s *La Confession d’Augustin* remain for me unreadable. Something in these two texts, two such different texts, two such different events, frustrates and outdoes my supposed professional competence as a reader (a supposedly competent reader of these two authors at least), opens for me a fearful zone in which accurate gloss and pedagogical clarity appear inaccessible – and perhaps even undesirable.” As he continues, Bennington welcomes the unreadability of *Circonfession* as a necessary structure of the notion of “reading” itself: “The event of that discomfiting visitation or infraction, however, brings with it something like a truth of reading itself: we read because we do not know how to read, as Lyotard has Augustine say, and we might be inclined to argue that reading as such only ever takes place in an experience of unreadability, an unreadability to which reading would therefore, constitutively, confess.”



by the present study. This text's unprecedented resistance to being "read," in the conventional sense of the term, already questions its status as being part of the Derridean "corpus," if not for the simple reason that, without what we will call Bennington's "theft" of Derrida's "corpus," and without his impeccable articulation of the Derridean "system," the surprise of *Circonfession* would not have come. While provoking Derrida to "create" the surprise, Bennington simultaneously exposes from the beginning the 'dramatic' nature of the contract, which he says belongs to « les domaines diaboliques du simulacre » [Bennington JD 16]. Bennington accordingly stresses the ambiguity of his own "role" along with the structural necessity of the 'simulacrum': « En général nous acceptons sans mauvaise conscience le rôle pédagogique qui nous est assigné ici : nous cherchons à comprendre et à expliquer le plus clairement possible la pensée-de-Derrida, jusqu'au moment où les termes « comprendre », « expliquer » et « pensée » (voire « Derrida ») ne suffisent plus » [Bennington JD 12]. While Bennington clearly acts out the role of the pedagogue, sketching a logic to deconstructive "thought," he does so on the principle that this project is bound to fail, but also that the failure of his utterly meticulous study constitutes the path to the "surprise" of deconstruction, the unpredictable *event* already at work within the repeatability of the Derridian "system."<sup>120</sup>

In these terms, one legitimates the call for positing a 'deconstructive system' – articulated with rigor and clarity – for it to fail "successfully" ("fail again, fail better" – the

---

Geoffrey Bennington, "Time – for the Truth," in *Augustine and postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession*, ed. by J.D. Caputo and M.J. Scanlon, Indiana University Press, 2005, 54.

<sup>120</sup> « Dans cette ouverture de l'autre (vers l'autre, pour l'autre, appelé par l'autre), sans laquelle le même ne serait pas, il y a la chance que quelque chose arrive. Il se trouve que ce qui rend notre travail impossible est justement ce qui le rend possible du même coup. Donner sa chance à la chance de cette rencontre » [Bennington JD 18].

Beckettian axiom): for the system of articulated thought to disclose its own limitations and, as Bennington puts it, its *insufficiencies*.

According to the rules of this friendly yet utterly serious – *deadly*, as we shall see – “drama,” Bennington effectively covers the entirety of Derrida’s corpus, speaks from the position of Derrida, in his place, and without a single quotation. In this “incorporation,” Bennington seeks to enact the principle that the structure of writing (in general, but his own particularly) must subscribe paradoxically to a practice of citationality: « Que tout le livre soit ainsi condamné à être en quelque sorte une citation nous a déterminé à adopter comme règle de ne jamais citer directement les textes de Derrida » [Bennington JD 14]. Writing Derrida – on him, for him, and in his place – Bennington refuses to quote the original corpus following conventional academic practices: welcoming instead the possibility of misreading and “mistakes” as already part of the structure of citationality, Bennington therefore puts his own name under erasure by endorsing « une certaine passivité face au donné, au don » of Derrida’s work [Bennington JD 14], thus letting himself become the “crypt” of Derrida’s name and corpus. In deconstructive “terms,” Bennington’s formalization of deconstruction in a book whose title is comprised only of a proper name – *Jacques Derrida* – reclaims the name as an independent label of ‘theoretical thought,’ and by the same token posits the *mortality* of the individual who bears it, effectively putting him to death before his time. Through this wrenching of Derrida’s singular body from his proper name, now turned into an autonomous theoretical machine, Bennington forces Derrida to re-write himself singularly, inscribing a signature so idiosyncratic that it becomes almost unique, quasi-absolutely illegible, perhaps even impossible – this is at least the claim – to counter-sign

it in the future. I turn to the ‘hypertext’ in order to clarify these terms, as Bennington explains in *Derridabase* (and *in the name* of Derrida):

Mon nom propre me survit. Après ma mort, on pourra encore me nommer et parler de moi. Comme tout signe, « je » inclus, le nom comporte la possibilité nécessaire de pouvoir fonctionner en mon absence, de se détacher de son porteur : et selon la logique qu’on a déjà expérimentée, on doit pouvoir porter cette absence à un certain absolu, qu’on appelle la mort. On dira donc que, même de mon vivant, mon nom marque ma mort. Il est déjà porteur de la mort de son porteur. Il est déjà nom d’un mort, la mémoire anticipée d’une disparition [...]. La signature, et c’est justement ce qui la distingue du nom propre en général, essaie de rattraper le propre qu’on a vu se déproprier aussitôt dans le nom.

Dans la parole, ce qu’on appelle l’énonciation marque la présence du moment présent dans lequel je parle. La signature devrait en être l’équivalent dans l’écrit [...]. Le je-ici-maintenant impliqué dans toute énonciation et perdu dans l’écrit est en principe récupéré dans la signature qu’on appose au texte. L’acte de signer, qui ne se réduit pas à la simple inscription de son nom propre [...], s’efforce, par un tour supplémentaire, de réapproprier la propriété toujours déjà perdue dans le nom lui-même. [Bennington, JD 140-142]

Bennington’s role in *incorporating* Derrida in his “Derridabase”<sup>121</sup> – and becoming somewhat the repository, archive, or *khora* of Derrida’s corpus, – participates

---

<sup>121</sup> As Bennington himself argues, the dichotomy between the repeatability of the proper name and the singularity of the signature cannot hold for very long, insofar as a signature structurally calls for or promises the advent of a counter-signature: a deferred copy of

in the structure of “*la parole soufflée*”, i.e. the “mother function,” as defined in the previous chapters.<sup>122</sup> On the one hand, Bennington effectively ‘robs’ Derrida of his speech, quite literally erasing his spoken words from his corpus; then on the other hand, Bennington becomes, as Derrida himself will soon attest, the Divine figure who always already knows, even prior to the author himself, every single word by Derrida, and therefore has become the whisperer or prompter (*souffleur*) of his entire corpus. While transforming the proper name *Jacques Derrida* into a theoretical ‘machine,’ Bennington ‘robs’ Derrida of his identity – provided that the *gift* Bennington claims to receive from Derrida implies, in deconstructive “terms,” neither knowledge nor agreement from the giver.<sup>123</sup> By the end of his hypertext, Bennington explicitly ‘confesses’ his so-called

---

itself to authenticate the person’s true identity. This repeatability exposes the signature to the same risk of surviving the death of the actual person who signs, i.e. by risk of counterfeit imitation of mechanical reproduction by a machine, the so-called “autopen.” As Bennington goes on in his section of the ‘signature’ he assimilates the acts of writing and reading to those of signing and counter-signing [Bennington JD 153-156]; it is accordingly relevant to note that Bennington effectively counter-signs Derrida’s signature by writing his ‘Derridabase,’ i.e. he signs *in the place* of Derrida, for him, as though Derrida were already and truly dead. In effect, the entire contract between Bennington and Derrida then consists in Derrida counter-signing (ie. *confirming* and *contesting* at the same time) Bennington’s counter-signature. The question remains, therefore, whether *Circonfession* is nothing but a mere *contestation* of Bennington’s ‘system,’ as Derrida repeatedly asserts, or is it by the same token and at the same time (a double bind) also a genuine *confirmation* of that system.

<sup>122</sup> Derrida repeatedly asserts in *Circonfession* that Bennington acts out the function of God, which in addition to being Augustine’s, is evidently also Artaud’s infamous God: « Et qui peut être ce voleur sinon ce grand Autre invisible, persécuteur furtif doublant partout, c’est à dire me redoublant et me dépassant, arrivant toujours avant moi où j’ai choisi d’aller, comme « ce corps qui me poursuivait » (me persécutait) « et ne suivait pas » (me précédait), qui peut-il être sinon Dieu ? » Jacques Derrida, « La Parole soufflée », in *L’Ecriture et la différence*, Edition du Seuil, 1967, 269.

<sup>123</sup> I refer to Bennington’s hypertext: « Si l’essence du don est de ne pas être objet d’échange, on voit qu’à strictement parler le don s’annule comme tel. Car votre gratitude face à un don que je vous fais fonctionne comme un paiement en retour ou en échange, et le don n’en est plus strictement un. Si, face à l’extrême difficulté d’être en position de recevoir un don [...] vous essayez, pour laisser une chance au don, de refouler toute

“theft” for which the “simulacrum” will have been only a pretext: « nous avons absorbé Derrida, sa singularité et sa signature, l’événement qu’on a tellement voulu dire, dans une textualité où il risque d’avoir tout simplement disparu. [...] Ce livre ne vous servira en rien, à vous autres, à vous, l’autre, et n’aura été qu’un prétexte dérobé pour y inscrire ma propre signature derrière, dans son dos » [Bennington JD 292]. *Jacques Derrida* in these terms marks the “instant of death” of Jacques Derrida. But the stakes of this so-called “theft” will paradoxically prove to be Bennington’s *gift* to Derrida, and allow him, along with his entire corpus, to counter-sign with a radically unprecedented and unpredictable inscription, thus allowing him the chance to come out again as (an-)other.

### *Une Docte ignorance*

One of the most ‘surprising’ aspects of Derrida’s response in *Circonfession* (the obvious one being his choice of syntactical structure) is the following: He begins by acknowledging that Geoffrey Bennington was successful in his endeavor to say *everything* there is to say, explain, and systemize in regard to his corpus. But then, Derrida goes *unpredictably* further by asserting that Bennington’s rendition of his work is nothing short of *divine*, and that what Derrida baptizes here as the “*théologique*” reaches such perfection that it can predict without errors *everything* Derrida *will* say in the

---

réaction, vous inscrivez néanmoins le don dans la possibilité de l’échange en le recevant ou en le reconnaissant comme don, consciemment ou inconsciemment. Pour que le don soit pur de tout mouvement d’échange, il devrait passer inaperçu du donataire. Il devrait ne pas être reçu comme don, ne pas être don du tout. Le don n’« existe » ou ne donne que dans un échange où déjà il ne donne plus. » [Bennington JD 176-178].

future:<sup>124</sup> « Geoff [...] reste tout près de Dieu car il sait tout sur la ‘logique’ de ce que j’ai pu naguère mais aussi de ce que je peux à l’avenir penser ou écrire, sur quelque sujet que ce soit, si bien qu’il peut à bon droit se passer de citer telles phrases singulières qui me soient arrivées et dont ladite ‘logique’ ou ‘alogique’ suffirait à rendre compte » [Derrida JD 18]. In associating Bennington to the figure of God, who most disturbingly predicts even the content of his future work, Derrida gives himself the tool to redefine the notion of “surprise” as the “event,” i.e. as being not only unpredictable, but somehow so singular that it must be *unknowable* even to God.

As Derrida puts it, G[oeff]’s work is indeed absolutely comprehensive,  
 ... si bien même que me voilà privé d’avenir, plus d’événement à venir de moi, du moins en tant que je parle ou j’écris, sauf si ici même, sauve qui peut, cessant d’être sous sa loi, des choses improbables qui déstabilisent, déconcertent, surprennent à leur tour le programme de G., des choses qu’en somme il n’aura pas

---

<sup>124</sup> One cannot help but note, here again, the necessity of “dramatization,” “simulacrum,” and “role play,” inherent to the structure of the pact between Bennington and Derrida. This time, however, it manifests itself in Derrida’s uncompromising characterization of Bennington as “godly,” which comes to Derrida a tool for his “coup de poker.” We may indeed be naïve enough in noting that not only did Bennington admittedly incorporate the possibility of “mistakes” and “misreading” in his “hypertext,” as mentioned before, but he in fact assimilated their function to the very structure of “writing” and “citationality” *in accordance* with Derrida’s own elaboration. On a simply practical level, one may commit to an *in depth* study of Bennington’s hypertext, and hunt for *any* possible “mistake,” no matter how minute, as a single misstep would suffice to counter Derrida’s counter-argument. We may, for instance, question some pedagogical abstraction of what may read as “ambiguous” in Derrida’s writing, in excerpts referred to through page numbers only in parentheses. We may even go so far as to document the *exactitude* of the page references presented by Bennington as “proofs” to his argument, thus investigating whether he is capable of even the *smallest* “human mistake” or if he is, as Derrida suggests, truly “Divine.” But such an inquiry is, of course, entirely pointless. For Derrida’s “dramatization” plays indeed according to the rules, as he in turn “robs” Geoffrey Bennington of his ‘name’ using it arguably as a mere “conceptual” tool to the advantage of his own rhetoric in *Circonfession*.

pu, lui, G., non plus que ma mère ou la grammaire de son théologiciel, reconnaître, nommer, prévoir, produire, prédire, *unpredictable things* pour lui survivre, et si quelque chose doit encore se passer, rien n'est moins sûr, il faut qu'elle soit *unpredictable*, le salut d'un contre-feu... [Derrida JD 30-32].

The unpredictable “surprise” of *Circonfession* does not come from the text’s “content,” or the “truth” it should reveal, or confess, but it resides instead in the very *act* of its composition. We have elaborated at length in the previous chapter on the prevalence of the *act* of writing over the written text – the second being nothing but the residue, or the so-called “excrement” of the first – as a tentative definition of ‘theatrical writing.’ Here again, Derrida puts great emphasis on the *act* of writing, which in the case of *Circonfession* occurs under conditions that exceed any form of knowledge – and therefore exceed the *théologiciel*. More precisely, Derrida claims that his writing – beyond the contract with Geoff – is motivated by the event, both unpredictable and imminent, of his mother’s slow death:

... jamais l’écorce vif que je suis n’aura ainsi écrit, sachant d’avance le non-savoir dans lequel la venue imminente mais imprévisible d’un événement, la mort de ma mère, Sultana Esther Georgette Safar Derrida, viendra sculpter l’écriture du dehors, lui donner sa forme et son rythme depuis une interruption incalculable, jamais aucun de mes textes n’aura dépendu en son dedans le plus essentiel d’un dehors aussi coupant, accidentel, contingent, comme si chaque syllabe, et le milieu même de chaque périphrase se préparait à recevoir un coup de téléphone, la nouvelle de la mort d’une mourante... [Derrida JD 193]

The text is therefore both ‘inhabited’ and structured by the mother’s inevitable and unpredictable death, to the extent that the *lack* of knowledge or certitude becomes the driving force behind those 59 sentences. That lack creates the syntax and necessarily forbids any form of argumentation or thematization of the “unpredictable event.” The lack of “referent” equally reflects the instability of Derrida’s address in *Circonfession*. The mother alongside G., and the mother *as* G. (since Derrida deliberately merges these two figures together), becomes the double address of *Circonfession*. Yet, ultimately that double address translates in the possibility of *no* address, or to the (radically) absent *other*: « ... car le lecteur aura cru comprendre que j’écris *pour* ma mère, peut-être pour une morte ... » [Derrida JD 26-27]. The address is all the more spectral in that the mother proves to be, in turn, incapable of acknowledging her son’s presence, addressing him accurately as her son, and also naming him, while Derrida writes *Circonfession* « ... me demandant à chaque instant si elle vivra encore, ayant toujours cessé de me reconnaître, quand j’arriverai au bout de cette phrase qui semble porter la mort qui la porte, si elle vivra assez pour me laisser le temps de tous ces aveux... » [Derrida, JD 44]. The text is generated by a sense of urgency provoked by the advent of her imminent yet unpredictable death, as though, in writing, Derrida were indebted to her to beyond the possibility of repayment: « ... ne me sentirais-je pas aussi coupable, ne le serais-je pas en vérité si j’écrivais ici de moi sans garder la moindre trace d’elle... » [Derrida JD 38]. The status of this collection of 59 sentences demonstrates itself to be idiomatic to Derrida’s experience faced with the event of his mother’s death. Even more accurately,



one may say that these sentences were written *by* the event, which generates the text through Derrida's passive lack of premonition of its "truth."

In a presentation almost a decade *after the event* of *Circonfession*, entitled "Composing 'Circumfession,'" Derrida re-examines the status of his own text – which refuses any stable form of 'referent' or 'addressee':

"Circumfession" is something that became clearer to me *nachträglich*, years after the fact. Of course, what I wrote in "Circumfession" was that I was trying to write something that Geoff's text, or system, or formalized interpretation, could not predict precisely, could not foresee or could not account for. I wasn't sure I would succeed. I'm not sure I have succeeded in doing so. But that was the strategy. But in order to do so, I was relying on the fact that I was producing a text in my own idiom, a text as a singular signature that, as an event, not as a content or as a meaning, as a singular event, could not be part of, or integrated by, Geoff's text. But at the time I thought that this experience was, to oversimplify, of a performative genre, of a performative structure. Usually one thinks that a performative speech act consists in producing the event that it speaks about. [...] I was not only trying performatively to challenge Geoff's powerful account of what I had been doing or what I could do. I was not doing that. I was waiting without waiting for the death of my mother. That is, the event was unpredictable to me. I did not know when my mother would interrupt my sentence, in the middle of a sentence. This event could not be produced by a speech act. What characterizes an

event is precisely that it defeats any performativity, that it happens, precisely, beyond any performative power.<sup>125</sup>

*Circonfession*'s 59 sentences or periods belong therefore to the "performative" category, but in a very particular meaning: they do not, in accordance with Austin's 'performative speech', create the event through enunciation, and in accordance with a series of pre-established laws or conventions. They are instead written *by* the event and bear witness to it, but only insofar as the text is powerless in its capacity to expose the event as "content" or inscribe it permanently after its occurrence. Ultimately, a text written *by* the event may reveal nothing but its own *act* of origination, while that act neither refers to the event nor produces the event: but its own perpetuation becomes a trace of the event. Whence the interminable sentences which by the sole fact of stretching themselves indefinitely, instead of positing categorical concepts, crack open the *théologique* (« ... des mots et des concepts ne font pas des phrases et donc des événements ... » [Derrida JD 29]). Sentences are performative in their aptitude to regenerate themselves indefinitely, motivated precisely by their inability to find the accurate word or concept to define the event once and for all. While re-examining the notion of performative sentences, Derrida calls them "confessions":

... que vous seriez tenté de comparer au Dieu d'Augustin lorsque celui-ci demande s'il y a du sens à lui avouer quelque chose alors qu'il sait déjà tout

---

<sup>125</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Composing 'Circumfession,'" in *Augustine and postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession*, ed. by J.D. Caputo and M.J. Scanlon, Indiana University Press, 2005, 20-21, hereafter referred to as CC.

d'avance, ce qui n'empêcha pas mon compatriote d'aller au delà de ce *Cur confitemur Deo scienti*, non vers une vérité, mais une sévérité de l'aveu qui jamais ne se réduit à dire le vrai, à faire savoir quoi que ce soit ou à se présenter nu dans sa vérité, comme si Augustin voulait encore, à force d'amour, faire qu'en arrivant à Dieu, à Dieu quelque chose arrive, et lui arrive quelqu'un qui transformât la science de Dieu en une docte ignorance, il dit devoir le faire en écrivant, justement après la mort de sa mère ... [Derrida JD 19]

Derrida recalls the opening of Augustine's *Confessions* where Augustine notes that the process of writing the book incited his affection toward God, not because of what he avowed or confessed in it, but because of its *labor* of writing. In comparing Geoffrey Bennington's system to Augustine's God, Derrida assimilates his own writing to an act of confession, in Augustine's performative sense. In that sense, confession says *nothing* (new) but only bears witness to the event of its own writing as something that may not be inscribed. Accordingly, the act of avowal also affects, alters, and defers the truth it confesses, as well as the truth of the system to which it is confessing. This writing *does* something to the truth it posits, like a negation already inscribed in the very act of positing. Writing here transforms learned knowledge into a learned ignorance (*une docte ignorance*). But the enduring singularity of Derrida's response, in his unpredictable fraternity with Augustine, is that the negation and alteration caused by writing upon the system, and by confession upon the truth it confesses, is triggered, for Augustine as for himself, in response to the *singular* event of the death of the mother. In Derrida's words, if confession brings *something* to God, or goes as far as *altering* God by the very act of

confessing, this *something* is actually *someone*, and it is quite literally the *dying mother*. We shall see by the end of this chapter that the translation of this “deconstructive principle” in the singular event of the mother’s death is not a simple autobiographical anecdote or coincidence behind Derrida’s writing, but it is the founding structure of a singular form of writing that bridges the logic of the text with that of life itself.

Prior to that elaboration, I would like to rethink the status of *Circonfession* in the following section, by suggesting a structural difference between the figures of Geoff and Georgette despite their claimed identification. This distinction will situate the polyphonic structure of the text as torn between two poles, somewhere between Bennington’s “machinistic” system on the one hand, and on the other hand what we have identified in the previous chapters as a mute language or “mother tongue,” idiosyncratic to Derrida, that he calls here « *la langue crue*. » I have earlier suggested that Derrida’s “dramatic” characterization of Bennington as the figure of God serves him as a rhetorical tool to characterize his writing as a form of “unpredictable” confession; I argue similarly that the singular and recurrent notion of « *la langue crue* » is foundational to the composition of *Circonfession*, while it participates in a form of “dramatization” in its own right.

### ***La Langue crue* and The ‘Labor of Theory’**

*Circonfession* is built on a polyphonic – choral – structure. Each of the 59 sentences of *Circonfession* interweaves what Derrida himself identifies as four distinct voices, each belonging to four different periods: 1) the act of writing in the present, the time of the

signature; 2 ) the mother's imminent yet unpredictable death, her agony on a hospital bed, and of her inability to name or recognize her son, synchronous with the time of writing *Circonfession*; 3) the quotes in Latin from Augustine's *Confessions*, which regularly interrupt Derrida's present writing; 4) the quotes from a previous text by Derrida, extracted from a notebook, an unfinished project on the notion of circumcision, which also repeatedly interrupt his present writing. The polyphony of this enunciation, and the palimpsestic nature of this writing enact a primary function of the notion of "text" in deconstruction. No enunciation, inscription, or even signature, occurs simply in the absolute present, but constitutes a series of quotations or conjurations of past inscriptions. As a result, while these multiple textual layers or voices are factually distinct from one another, they also take part in the resistance in the text to being read, as Derrida testified in the studio: they become virtually indistinguishable and intertwined during the time of their inscription.

But the polyphony or palimpsestic structure of this writing relies additionally on a more fundamental category (Derrida will call this category: *impossible* and *unbelievable* – *incroyable*, in the different meanings of the term) of an *inarticulate tongue*: « *le vocable cru*. » These words in fact open *Circonfession* and to some extent carry the 59 « *périodes et périphrases* » to the end. Derrida opens his respond to Bennington by opposing to his system a *raw*, immediate, private (« *ma langue, l'autre* »), and yet *impossible* tongue:

Le vocable cru, lui [Geoff] disputer ainsi le cru, comme si d'abord j'aimais à le relancer, et le mot de « relance », le coup de poker n'appartient qu'à ma mère, comme si je tenais à lui pour lui chercher querelle quant à ce que parler cru veut

dire, comme si jusqu'au sang je m'arrachais à lui rappeler, car il [Geoff] le sait, *cur confitemur Deo scienti*, ce qui nous est par le cru demandé, le faisant ainsi dans ma langue, l'autre, celle qui depuis toujours me court après, tournant en rond autour de moi, une circonférence qui me lèche d'une flamme et que *j'essaie à mon tour de circonvenir*, n'ayant jamais aimé que *l'impossible, le cru auquel je ne crois pas*, et le mot cru laisse affluer en lui par le canal de l'oreille, une veine encore, la foi, la profession de foi ou la confession, la croyance, la crédulité, comme si je tenais à lui [Geoff] chercher dispute en opposant un écrit naïf, crédule, qui par quelque *transfusion immédiate* en appelle à *la croyance du lecteur autant qu'à la mienne*, depuis ce rêve en moi depuis toujours d'une autre langue, d'une langue toute crue... [Derrida JD 7-8, my emphases]

The motif of « *le vocable cru* » opens and runs through Derrida's entire text: this « *vocable* » belongs to a register admittedly idiomatic, idiosyncratic to Derrida's particular genealogy, and thus *haunts* his writing while continuously slipping away from its immediate grip. Derrida assimilates the notion of *cru* to *cruauté*, and also to *sang*, all of which seem very close to their Artaudian connotations. More specific to Derrida is his association of that *vocable* to a state of “dream” or “fantasy”: *un rêve*. He associates it with the experience in childhood of the nurse's syringe drawing blood from his arm, thus making visible to his young eyes the content of his body, invisible until then: « ...le volume de sang, incroyable pour l'enfant que je reste ce soir, expose au dehors, donc à sa mort, ce qu'il y aura de plus vivant en moi... » [Derrida, JD 14]. The so-called fantasy of the syringe becomes here the fanstasy of writing in “raw terms”: « je compare la plume à

une seringue, et toujours je rêve d'une plume qui soit une seringue [...] une fois trouvée la juste veine, plus aucun labeur, aucune responsabilité, aucun risque de mauvais goût ni de violence, le sang se livre seul... » [Derrida JD 13]. Let us note for now that while this « *vocable cru* » demands from the reader and the writer *faith* and *belief* (*la croyance*) – rather than the ability to read, interpret and analyze –, the fantasy of such a « *vocable* » consists in a flawless ability and effectiveness to expose outside the body what was inside it, without the possibility of *error*. It does so instantly and mechanically, as Derrida says: *le sang* is transmitted and made visible without *any* labor on the part of the individual.<sup>126</sup>

The categories of the *impossible*, *unbelievable*, *dream-like*, describing also a child's realization of the possibility of his death (by draining away the blood), confirm beyond any conceptual stability a functional necessity of the *phantasmatic* category of « *le vocable cru* »: a “dramatic” necessity of creating a non-category to situate and find the status of *Circonfession*. Because on the one hand Derrida writes to respond to Geoff's infamous and divine “*théologiciel*,” which is altogether omniscient, machinistic, and perhaps pedagogically *too* efficient. On the other hand, the *59 prayers* in *Circonfession* remain very distinct from – but still inhabited by – « *le vocable cru* ». While the *théologiciel* provides true knowledge, the « *vocable* » provides truly *nothing* and forces instead the reader in the position of *already being a believer* before engaging with this « *écrit naïf*. » In that sense, « *le vocable cru* » is not structurally very different from

---

<sup>126</sup> Even though Derrida opens *Circonfession* by allegedly opposing Geoff's machines to this so-called (and fantasized) « *vocable cru* », it should not be left unnoted that Derrida's dream-like vision of the above mentioned process of transmission of this « *vocable* » is described through attributes similar to those Derrida had already condemned in the *théologiciel*: its immediacy, its efficiency, and its autonomy, as it offers the most private substance of the individual's body to the public eyes, and moreover effortlessly, while finally posing the imminent risk, as does the *théologiciel*, of Derrida's death.

Artaud's "intellectual cry" previously examined, utterly idiosyncratic to the individual: « ces forces qui du dehors ont la forme d'un cri ». <sup>127</sup> *Circonfession* in fact subscribes to neither of these two categories. Derrida's response is neither confrontational nor oppositional in regard to Geoff's system. To the all-too-accessible and omniscient *théologiciel* – which supposedly transforms "deconstruction" into a byproduct made mechanically accessible to the public domain, Derrida opposes the fantasy of "le cru," *la veine juste*: « ... ce qui tout au long de ce mot de veine laisse ou fait venir à la chance de tels événements sur lesquels nul programme, aucune machine logique ou textuelle jamais ne se fermera, depuis toujours en vérité n'a opéré qu'à force de ne pas prévaloir sur le cru de ce qui arrive... » [Derrida DJ 18]. *Le cru* supposedly counter-attacks Geoff, as it is here defined to be an attribute of « *ce qui arrive* », i.e. in Derridian 'parlance:' the *event*: unpredictable, singular, and therefore indecipherable. It is therefore more accurate to state that the 59 sentences of *Circonfession* operate in a non-categorical space, one negotiating between the all-too-public and legible 'Derridabase' and the all-too-private and illegible *cru*.

To be even more precise, *Circonfession* distinguishes itself from the above two categories in one essential aspect. We find that both the *théologiciel* and the dream-like « *vocable cru* » – despite their similar sheer effectiveness, accuracy, and autonomy – fail to account for the essential and irreducible notion of what Derrida calls in *Circonfession* "labor," embedded in and indistinguishable from "theory." The "labor of theory," as Derrida notes, defines the generative process of writing. Provided that "theoretical" systematization involves the process of writing, it must therefore go through such a labor.

---

<sup>127</sup> Antonin Artaud, A.Artaud, "Position de la Chair," in *Oeuvres*, Gallimard Quarto, 2004, 146.



However, that notion remains too often erased, *after the fact*, and sometimes on purpose, for reasons that Derrida reads as a propensity toward intellectual “coquetry:”

... je me rappelle alors m’être couché très tard après un mouvement de colère et d’ironie contre une phrase de Proust, louée dans un livre de cette collection, « Les Contemporains », et qui dit : « une œuvre où il y a des théories est comme un objet sur lequel on laisse la marque du prix », et je ne trouve rien de plus vulgaire que cette bienséance franco-britannique, européenne en vérité, j’y associe Joyce, Heidegger, Wittgenstein et quelques autres, la littérature du salon de cette république des lettres, la grimace d’un bon goût assez naïf pour croire qu’on peut effacer le labeur de la théorie, comme s’il n’y en avait pas chez Pr., et médiocre, croire qu’on doit et surtout qu’on peut effacer le prix à payer, le symptôme sinon l’aveu, moi je demande toujours de quoi la théorie est un symptôme et je l’avoue, j’écris en mettant le prix, j’affiche, non que le prix soit lisible au premier venu, car je suis pour une aristocratie sans distinction, donc sans vulgarité, pour une démocratie de la compulsion au plus haut prix, il faut mettre le prix pour lire le prix affiché ... [Derrida JD 62-63]

The reader and the writer must endure *labor*, in separate times and rhythms, which process becomes inseparable from the notion of “theory.” The process of *labor* refuses and invalidates mechanical transmission, spontaneous access, immediacy, autonomy, efficacy, all of which are attributes of the *théologiciel* and *le cru* alike. One must labor precisely to achieve all of those attributes, but as we shall see, that necessary *labor* involved in the process makes those goals unachievable. We shall be careful here not to

assimilate or to confuse too quickly Derrida's notion of *labor* and *price* required for the "production of theory" with the Marxist articulation of the "labor theory of value": the "labor of theory" here mentioned by Derrida, as he painstakingly endures throughout *Circonfession*, shows itself to be quite the opposite to an economical system of production based on labor and exchange values, persistently refusing to *produce* any form of knowledge, concept, or theoretical result susceptible to being used in "philosophical" or "intellectual" transactions. Deconstruction and the "theory" which may be derived from it require the reader and the writer alike *to labor at a loss*, so to speak, and to pay the price for a product whose nature and existence cannot be accounted for in advance.<sup>128</sup> This laborious yet necessarily *unproductive* process must be inherent to deconstructive writing, at least as expressed in Derrida's response to the *théologiciel*.

---

<sup>128</sup> The theatricality of such a unusual transaction – i.e. paying the necessary and non-refundable price for an unknown product –, which we ascribe here to the "theory" of deconstruction, is not arbitrarily reminiscent of Koltès' *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, whose entire 'plot' or 'dialogue' relies on a (non-)transition between a dealer and client negotiating tirelessly the price of a undisclosed product: « CLIENT: s'il était vrai que nous soyons, vous le vendeur en possession de marchandises si mystérieuses que vous refusez de les dévoiler et que je n'ai aucun moyen de les deviner, et moi l'acheteur avec un désir si secret que je l'ignore moi-même et qu'il me faudrait, pour m'assurer que j'en ai un, gratter mon souvenir comme une croûte pour faire couler le sang, si cela est vrai, pourquoi continuez-vous à les garder enfouies, vos marchandises, alors que je me suis arrêté, que je suis là, et que j'attends? » [Bernard-Marie Koltès, *Dans la solitude des champs de cotons*, Editions de Munuit, 1986, 26] « DEALER: Puisque vous êtes venu ici, au milieu de l'hostilité des hommes et des animaux en colère, pour ne rien chercher de tangible, puisque vous voulez être meurtri pour je ne sais quelle obscure raison, il va vous falloir, avant de tourner le dos, payer, et vider vos poches, afin de ne rien se devoir et ne rien s'être donné » [Koltès *Dans la solitude des champs de cotons* 53]. While no transaction takes place in the conventional sense of the term, there is instead a proliferation of speech feeding on its inability to formulate the real nature of the transition, which in turn requires the reader/spectator, using Derrida's 'term,' pay the price (*mettre le prix*) for receiving the gift that remains ultimately unpredictable and unknown both to the giver (Koltès) and to us.

As I will argue in the remaining section of this chapter, the response to this disempowered text translates into a transfer of *labor* through the *acts* of writing and reading, insofar as that transaction subscribes to the structure of the ‘*gift*,’ i.e. it remains unknown and unpredictable to the one who gives and the one who receives. In other words, writer or reader, one is required quite literally to *go through labor* and generate, as we shall see, an unpredictable “reaction,” “inscription,” or “conversion,” emerging *from the real body*, outside the *corpus*. As the word itself suggests, in echo with Derrida’s structural association of writing with the mother, *labor* describes and conjures up the maternal figure in the process of writing and reading alike.

### **The Maternal Cut: Writing on the Body**

In *Circonfession*, Derrida revisits the ceremony of “circumcision” as an act of inscription impressed, by the social and religious norms of his Judaic heritage, upon the body of an unknowing child. As Derrida’s earlier suggestion that, in performative writing, *writing happens to the writer*, circumcision is similarly applied to a passive and unknowing child. According to Derrida in “Composing ‘Circumfession,’” the act of circumcision leaves the trace – on the body – of what comes to be for the child something of an *unlived*, but foundational experience, very similar to a “traumatic” event leaving an indelible yet unreadable trace on the body:

The event is absolutely unpredictable, that is, beyond any performativity. That’s where a signature occurs. If I so much insist on circumcision in this text, it is

because circumcision is precisely something which happens to a powerless child before he can speak, before he can sign, before he has a name. It is by this mark that he is inscribed in a community, whether he wants it or not. This happened to him and leaves a mark, a scar, a signature on his body. This happened before him, so to speak. It's a heritage that he cannot deny, whatever he does or he doesn't do.

[CC 21]

Circumcision is imposed upon the child, without the child's knowledge, in the name of a shared social heritage. Importantly, circumcision marks – with an indelible scar – the child's entrance into the social order, or to use a non-deconstructive “term,” his or her entrance into the Lacanian “symbolic.” Meaning to go precisely against (at least what he considers to be) the traditionally phallic – or paternal – characterization of the “symbolic order,” Derrida associates, with respect to Judeo-Christian tradition, the inaugurating act of circumcision with the ‘mother figure,’ thus meaning to subvert that convention, as in his reading of Genet in *Glas*, by coining the notion of « *la bite de la mère*. »<sup>129</sup> He indicates that the mother is not only responsible for the act of circumcision, but that her *elliptical* cut differs from what is conventionally accepted as the *paternally* induced fear of castration, which is supposed to keep the child *separated* from the mother. The *maternal* act of circumcision is not as thetic as the paternal blade. It subscribes to a double bind: on the one hand, it authorizes the child's entrance into society, much in the same way as the phallic *le-nom-du-père*; but on the other hand, it

---

<sup>129</sup> « Cette bite auprès de laquelle je dors, c'est moins celle du père, comme on le croirait, que la Vierge Marie elle-même. Je ne dis pas que ce n'est pas celle du père, je dis ‘moins que.’ Mais pour savoir comment s'écrit celle du père, il faut encore élaborer, induire, pour mieux glisser. » Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, vol. 1., Editions Denoël/Gonthier, 1981, 42.

reinforces the mother's indelible trace which now perpetuates itself on the child's body. The foundational ceremony of circumcision, which welcomes the child into social norms, is simultaneously described as both a "cannibalistic" and "incestuous" ritual. While the child is given the chance to grow out of *infantia* thanks to circumcision, he or she still carries inside some sort of an 'umbilical cord' that is never be entirely cut:

... la circoncision, autre mot pour péritomie, cette coupure du pourtour, est instituée par la mère, pour elle, la cruauté lui revenant en somme, et parfois l'acte même de découper cette sorte de bague, je pense à Catherine de Sienne, à la pierre, au couteau, des tomes en réserve pour reconstituer le sujet, le reste même reviendra à la mère dont on dit que naguère, dans le pays de mes ancêtres, la descendante de Zipporah, celle qui repéra la défaillance d'un Moïse incapable de circonscrire son propre fils, avant de lui dire « Vous m'êtes un époux de sang » devait manger le prépuce alors sanglant, j'imagine en le suçant d'abord, ma première cannibale aimée, l'initiatrice de la porte sublime de la fellation...

[Derrida JD 66-68].

The ambiguity inherent in the generative function of circumcision resonates with a similar ambiguity in the motif of "the prohibition of incest," which has been seminal to Derrida's corpus starting from his readings of Rousseau and Levi-Strauss. There, Derrida finds a particular form of aporia behind the prohibitive law, whose alleged function was to ensure the transition for man from the state of 'nature' to one of 'society.' Derrida expresses that aporetic structure in the following terms: « La prohibition de l'inceste est universelle; en ce sens on pourrait la dire naturelle; — mais elle est aussi une prohibition,

un système de normes et d'interdits — et en ce sens on devrait la dire culturelle »

[Derrida ED 415]. Derrida thus argues that the notion of “incest” is itself simultaneously born with its “prohibition,” another way of saying that “incest” is only defined as a form transgression, and never existed in the modern sense prior to the prohibitive law. As a member of society participating in the enforcement of the law against incest, one might therefore say, as Derrida notes, « c'est toujours *comme si j'avais commis un inceste.* »<sup>130</sup>

One always already carries the incestuous act within oneself through its prohibition – we may say *elliptically, peripherally* : guilty without having yet committed the act. A similar form of aporia is embedded in Derrida’s treatment of circumcision. *On the one hand*, circumcision marks the child’s entrance into society, as he becomes subject to the norms enforced by its ritual, including those claiming to prohibit or ‘cure’ what the heritage claims to be a series of “disorders,” that may as well include “incest” or “cannibalism”:

« ... début du 20<sup>e</sup> : on traite par la circoncision les ‘désordres’ (pertes séminales, masturbation) [...] le juif non circoncis est condamné à la géhenne... » [Derrida JD 227].

The mark of circumcision therefore enforces social, medical, and religious norms, whose lack of enforcement on the child would go as far as to condemn his soul to eternal damnation. But, *on the other hand*, circumcision always already carries through its very enforcement a re-enactment of those prohibited disorders, particularly incest and cannibalism, not randomly attributed to the mother:

---

<sup>130</sup> « Si ayant lieu, l'inceste ne devait confirmer l'interdit : avant l'interdit, il n'est pas l'inceste ; interdit, il ne peut devenir inceste qu'à reconnaître l'interdit. On est toujours en-deçà ou au-delà de la limite, de la fête, de l'origine de la société, de ce présent dans lequel simultanément l'interdit se donne(ra)it avec la transgression : ce qui (se) passe toujours et (pourtant) n'a proprement jamais lieu. C'est toujours comme si j'avais commis un inceste. » Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, Editions de minuit, 1967, 377.

...la jouissance suprême pour tous, d'abord pour lui, moi, le nourrisson, imaginez l'aimée (me) circoncisant elle même, comme faisait la mère dans le récit biblique, provoquant lentement l'éjaculation dans sa bouche au moment où elle avale la couronne de peau sanglante avec le sperme en signe d'alliance exultante, ses jambes ouvertes, les seins entre les miennes, riant, tous deux riant, se passant les peaux de bouche à bouche comme une bague... [Derrida JD 203].

The ceremony of circumcision has always been conducted, from its mythical roots, by enacting the very forbidden practices it seeks to "cure." Circumcision becomes indeed, like the structure of the prohibition of incest, the perpetuation of the sins it condemns, as though the cut-up umbilical cord were forever internally reattached through cannibalistic rituals, and the child pulled back inside the mother, while the cut has paradoxically guaranteed for the future the unbreakable link between mother and child.

Derrida accordingly assimilates the structure of "confession" to that of "circumcision," following the axiom that one confesses oneself along with the other inside "me," given that "I" is always already inhabited by the uncanny figure of the (m)other: « ... en toute hâte, je confesse ma mère, on confesse toujours l'autre, je me confesse veut dire je confesse ma mère veut dire j'avoue faire avouer ma mère, je la fais parler en moi... » [Derrida JD 139]. Through him, the mother speaks. The mother's speech impressed upon him is not merely the manifestation of the unpredictable event of her death. Her mute speech in his writing becomes in fact the signal of her omnipresence ever since the mythical act of Derrida's circumcision. The uncanny presence of the mother *in* the son translates a never-ending "theft" of his identity. The mother's inability

to recognize Derrida by the time he writes *Circonfession* simply espouses the structure of “theft” of the son’s identity, of his existence altogether, according to Derrida, as her alleged regret of him being born becomes a motif running throughout *Circonfession*. « Je suis perdante » she reportedly said at Derrida’s birth, still mourning the death of another son, Derrida’s missed encounter with his ghost brother: « ...un frère mourut à quelques mois, moins d’un an avant ma naissance... » [Derrida JD 88].

Derrida’s rendition of experiencing his mother’s “theft” of his identity shows up a meeting point between “autobiographical facts” and the textual structure of “the mother function,” or what we have called « *le souffle* »: like the *théologiciel*, she erases Derrida’s existence altogether, while stealing away his spoken words, quoting him without acknowledging the utter singularity of his speech, as though it never belonged to him in the first place:

... je me rappelle que le 24 décembre 1988, alors que déjà elle ne disait presque plus rien qui fût articulé, ni apparemment ajusté à la situation, rien qui ainsi parût répondre à la règle normale de l’échange humain, elle prononça clairement, au milieu de gémissements confus « J’ai envie de me tuer », et précisément ce que G., là-dessus, tout près ou trop tard, ne peut vous laisser entendre ni deviner, et que sans doute mes écrits peuvent manifester comme illisiblement, suivant telle règle de lecture à formuler, c’est que « j’ai envie de me tuer » est une phrase de moi, de moi toute craché, mais connue de moi seul, la mise en scène d’une suicide et la décision fictive mais combien motivée, convaincue, sérieuse, de mettre fin à mes jours... [Derrida JD 38-39]



The mother, complete ignoring her son, speaks his words: she quotes, from him, something he never said out loud, never made public, an idiom so particular to him that nobody else could have ever heard it. « J'ai envie de me tuer » : the mother speaks out Derrida's most intimate "truth," as she also effectively enacts the "truth" of that enunciation: by not attributing the origin of those words to her son, thus not acknowledging him, not admitting the "je" to be Jackie's, she acts as though Derrida had never been. Like Geoff, Georgette speaks for Derrida, to him, and in his place, quite simply put, by doing away with him: « ... le 5 février 1989, elle eut dans une rhétorique qui n'avais jamais pu être la sienne l'audace de ce trait dont hélas elle ne saura jamais rien, n'a sans doute rien su, et qui trouant la nuit répond à ma demande: "j'ai mal à ma mère," comme si elle parlait *pour* moi, à la fois dans ma direction et à ma place... » [Derrida JD 24]. If confession does indeed consist in avowing the other, it also translates into the perpetuation of the mother's original "cruelty," as forever inscribed and internalized by the act of circumcision. She has always already eaten up the child and denied him the possibility of existence as a separate, independent entity. While Derrida writes in *Circonfession* « ...on demande toujours pardon quand on écrit... » [Derrida JD 46], he is also asking forgiveness *for* the mother, in her place, as well as *to* the mother, who like Geoff remains very close to God. In these terms, *Circonfession* seems almost as though it inscribes itself in a long established tradition of confessions, including those by Augustine and Rousseau, of original "thefts":<sup>131</sup> but this time the guilt, fault, or cruelty, belongs to the mother, and consequently to Derrida himself, who does not dissociate himself from her "figure." As we are about to see, this notion of « *double-figure* » will

---

<sup>131</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Papier machine : le ruban de machine à écrire et autres réponses* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), 33ff.

have been exactly the event that may not be thematized (as I am doing here), or turn into a theoretical motif. While it is at the origin of writing, it takes place outside the written manuscript, singularly and quite literally on the body.

« *double-figure* »

We may argue that this type of confessional writing clearly does not belong to the autobiographical genre – as Derrida is virtually not speaking of himself, and with his own voice. The very possibility of “literature” is equally rejected. For the notion of elliptical writing cannot by any means be assimilated to figurative, allegorical, or metaphorical texts. “Tropes” and “figures” still allow for some sort of decipherment; here, they are *cracked open* alongside the system, in the *crudest*, most *unpredictable*, and *literal* fashion possible. At the time when he writes *Circonfession*, synchronous with the time of his mother’s slow death, Derrida develops for a short period an illness involving facial paralysis of the half left side of his « *figure* »: « ... le docteur dit : paralysie faciale d’origine ‘périphérique,’ *period*, électro-myogramme et scanner, le spectre cruel de cet œil gauche qui ne cligne plus, je le vois dissymétriser mes figures, il me regarde depuis ma mère en chien de faïence, comme pour anesthésier l’horreur, car sans faiblesse il me faut décrire l’escarre de ma vie... » [Derrida JD 97]. On the left side, Derrida sees emerging from his face the gaze of his dying mother, suspended, unblinking, and hostile to his other half, Derrida’s “real” self. Difficult, for him at least, to take such an apparition *figuratively*, as it emerges from inside the locus of his body that is most intimate and unique to him: the face. This apparition challenges the very notion of “gaze”

which we established as belonging to the founding structure of *Thea* in “theory”: the place from which one sees. The facial paralysis *is* the crack in the theoretical system, in ways that can hardly be more “real,” “literal,” and unpredictable. Derrida reads this apparition as the perpetuation of the trace of circumcision, the original cut that brought the *infans* into society and into language, simultaneously inscribing in him the mother's incestuous and cannibalistic figure. The apparition of the cut right in the middle of his face becomes, to him, the unpredictable inscription of the event, not in the written text, but *on his body*. In the double bind of the logic behind circumcision, the cut is at once the prohibition and the manifestation of a transgression, a sin. Both the mother's and Derrida's, the original transgression is being perpetuated *on* him, through bodily inscription, as a proof of guilt that has never been purged. Importantly, the apparition of the facial paralysis legitimates, for Derrida and for us, a different practice of reading and writing, and a relationship with the text no longer based on articulation and interpretation, but rather on a transmission of bodily “conversions”:

... le feu avec lequel je suis en train de jouer se joue encore de moi, je ne suis plus le même depuis la P[aralysie ] F[aciale], dont les signes semblent effacés alors que je sais n'être plus le même visage, la même *persona*, je me serais vu près de perdre la face, incapable de regarder dans la glace l'effroi de la vérité, la dissymétrie d'une vie en caricature, l'œil gauche qui ne cligne plus et te fixe insensible dans le répit d'un *Augenblick*, la bouche dit le vrai de travers, au défi des diagnostics ou pronostics, la défiguration te rappelle que tu n'habite pas ton visage parce que tu as trop de lieux, vous avez lieu en plus de lieux qu'il ne faut, et la transgression même viole toujours un lieu, une ligne infranchissable, elle se

saisit, punit, paralyse sur le coup, la topologie étant et n'étant plus ici une figure, et si c'est une défiguration, voilà le trope que je viens de prendre en pleine gueule pour avoir violé les lieux, tous, les lieux sacrés, les lieux de culte, les lieux des morts, les lieux de la rhétorique, les lieux d'habitation, tout ce que je vénère, non pas l'événement imprévisible que j'aurais écrit, moi, nommément des phrases propres à fissurer le géologique, non, cela s'est passé hors de l'écriture que vous lisez, en mon corps si vous aimez mieux, cette conversion devait être la surprise d'un événement m'arrivant à « moi-même », qui ne le suis donc plus, depuis le bois dont je me chauffe, c'est la « conversion » que j'appelais de mes vœux ou aveux, ils furent entendus même si vous restez sourds, si je ne pouvais prévoir ce à quoi me vouaient les vœux d'aveux, mais que cela ne soit pas déchiffrable ici sur la page ne signifie en rien l'illisibilité de ladite « conversion », il me faut apprendre à lire pendant que ma mère vit encore, c'est aujourd'hui le 23 Juillet, son 88<sup>e</sup> anniversaire, il me faut vous apprendre à m'apprendre à me lire depuis les compulsions, il y en a 59, qui nous agissent ensemble, nous les élus du malheur...

[Derrida JD 117-119]

While *Circonfession* relies on a principle of “indecipherability,” the relationship between the writer and the reader emerges through the process of an unpredictable transmission of “compulsions.” As Derrida seems to suggest, the text – i.e. the written manuscript – is fundamentally empty, devoid of conceptual consistency, truth, avowed secrets, or theoretical injunction. But these empty sentences are not dismissed as “illegible” provided that the inscription of the event occurs on the individual level, unpredictably,

outside the written manuscript, and on the body. Derrida calls for the transmission to translate into individual “conversions,” recalling the mechanism of what we have already analyzed, in Freud’s “psychopathic theater,” as “unconscious communication” or “symptomatic contamination.” Here, the empty text becomes the agent of “unconscious communication,” which in *Circonfession* simply calls itself “confession,” a writing that reveals absolutely no ‘truth’ or ‘secret,’ but instead, as Derrida borrows from Augustine, “makes (or does) the truth” (*fait la vérité*): « ... changeant de peau à chaque instant pour faire la vérité, à chacun la sienne, pour confesser sans que personne le sache, pourquoi voudrait-on savoir ou faire savoir ça, comme le don la confession doit être de l’inconscient, je ne connais pas d’autre définition de l’inconscient... » [Derrida JD 217].

Derrida associates the unconscious process of “conversion” (*changer de peau*) to that of *making the truth*, through the *labor* of writing, a process which occurs only on an individual basis. Each individual must *labor* through the text in writing or reading – opening up for the possibility for the event to inscribe itself, singularly, outside the text, and on the body. Admittedly, Derrida also calls for the possibility of “unconscious communication” through his uncanny use of the pronoun “nous” in his final « *nous les élus du malheur* ». The « nous » presupposes a (non-Derridian “term” of) “community,” based on the utterly individual experience of “*le mal*” or “*le malheur*”: an experience so singular it cannot be *shared* “conceptually.” Whence the simulacrum and dramatization involved in this “friendly contract” ending with Bennington admitting to writing the “Derridabase” for no other person than himself: « Ce livre ne vous servira en rien, à vous autres, à vous, l’autre, et n’aura été qu’un prétexte dérobé pour y inscrire ma propre signature derrière, dans son dos » [Bennington JD 292]. We may account for this

individual motivation (paradoxically writing for oneself through another's corpus) as the admission of Bennington's own singular *labor* in writing his study, and his own « *double-figure* » in signing, in his own name, for Derrida. We may accordingly conclude in saying that this very singular motivation may have in turn allowed Derrida to go through his own *labor*, in writing *Circonfession*, thus conjuring up his mother in his 59 "compulsions" that have overflowed beyond the written text, so that he may finally, after the event, make the following assessment: « ...voici l'événement, *unpredictable* et pour G. et pour moi... » [Derrida JD 115].

## Bibliography

- Aeschylus. *The Oresteia: Agamemnon, the Libation Bearers, and the Eumenides*. Trans. Alan Shapiro, Peter Burian. New York: Oxford University Press 2004
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. O. Murry and T.S. Dorsh. In *Classical Literary criticism*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2000
- Artaud, Antonin. *Oeuvres*. Édition établie, présentée et annotée par Evelyne Grossman, Paris: Quatro Gallimard, 2004
- —. *Collected Works*. Trans. Victor Corti. London: Calder and Boyars, 1971
- —. Tome XII, in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, NRF Gallimard, 1989
- —. *Le Théâtre et son double*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964. *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, New York: Grove Press, 1958.
- Augustine. *Confessions*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Bair, Deirdre. *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* London: Jonathan Cape, 1978
- Bataille, Georges. *L'Expérience intérieure*, Paris: Gallimard, 1954
- —. *La Littérature et le mal. Emily Brontë, Baudelaire, Michelet, Blake, Sade, Proust, Kafka, Genet*. Paris : Gallimard, 1957 et « Folio essais » n°148, 1990
- —. *La Part maudite*. Paris : Gallimard, 1949
- Beckett, Samuel. *Assez*. Paris : Minuit, 1966
- —. *Berceuse*, suivi de *Impromptu d'Ohio*. Translated into French by the author. Paris : Minuit, 1982
- —. *Bing*. Paris : Minuit, 1966
- —. *Catastrophe et autres dramaticules*. Paris : Minuit, 1982
- —. *Cette fois*. Translated into French by the author. Paris : Minuit, 1978
- —. *Comédie et actes divers*. Translated into French by the author. Paris : Minuit, 1966
- —. *Comment c'est*. Paris : Minuit, 1961
- —. *Compagnie*. Translated into French by the author. Paris : Minuit, 1979
- —. *La Dernière Bande*, suivi de *Cendres*. Translated into French by the author and Pierre Leiris. Paris : Minuit, 1960
- —. “Echo’s Bones”, typescript B389/122, Beckett Collection at the Baker Library,
- —. *En attendant Godot*. Paris : Minuit, 1952
- —. *Film*, suivi de *Souffle*. Translated into French by the author. Paris : Minuit, 1972
- —. *Fin de partie*, suivi de *Acte sans paroles*. Paris : Minuit, 1957
- —. *Imagination morte imaginez*. Paris : Minuit, 1965
- —. *L'innommable*. Paris : Minuit, 1953
- —. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1, 1929–1940*. Ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld & Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- —. *Mal vu mal dit*. Translated into French by the author. Paris : Minuit, 1981
- —. *Oh les beaux jours*, suivi de *Pas moi*. Translated into French by the author. Paris : Minuit, 1975
- —. *Pas*. Translated into French by the author. Paris : Minuit, 1977
- —. *Samuel Beckett : The Grove Centenary Edition of Samuel Beckett*. 4 Vol. Ed. by Paul Auster. New York : Grove Press, 2006

- —. *Solo*, suivi de *Catastrophe*. Translated into French by the author. Paris : Minuit, 1982
- —. *Tous ceux qui tombent*. Translated into French by the author and Robert Pinget. Paris : Minuit, 1957
- Bennington, Geoffrey. « Derridabase », in Geoffrey Bennington et Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, Paris, Seuil, « Les Contemporains », 1991
- —. “Time for the truth.” In *Augustine and postmodernism: confessions and circumfession* / edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2005
- —. *Lyotard : Writing the Event*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1988
- Bident, Christophe. *Bernard-Marie Koltès, genealogies*. Paris : Farrago, 2000
- —, Régis Salado, Christophe Triau, et Collectif. *Voix de Koltès*. Paris : Editions Segquier, 2005
- Biet, Christian et Christophe Triau. *Qu'est-ce que le théâtre*. Postface d'Emmanuel Wallon. Paris : Gallimard, 2006
- Blanchot, Maurice. *L'Amitié*. Paris : Gallimard, 1971
- —. *L'Entretien infini*. Paris : Gallimard, 1969
- —. *L'Espace littéraire*. Paris : Gallimard, 1955
- —. *Faux pas*. Paris : Gallimard, 1943
- —. *Le Livre à venir*. Paris : Gallimard, 1959
- —. *La Part du feu*. Paris : Gallimard, 1949
- —. *Le Pas au-delà*. Paris : Gallimard, 1975
- Brecht, Bertolt. *L'Achat du cuivre*, Paris: L'Arche, 1999.
- Brook. Peter. *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate*. New York: Touchstone, 1995
- Camus, Albert. *L'Etranger*. Paris: Gallimard, 1942
- Castellucci, Claudio et Romeo. *Les Pèlerins de la matière*. Paris: Les Solitaires intempestifs, 2001
- Davoine, Françoise and Jean-Max Gaudillère. *History Beyond Trauma*. Trans. by Susan Fairfield. New York: Other Press, 2004
- Decroux, Étienne. *Paroles sur le mime*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963
- Derrida, Jacques. *Artaud le Moma*, Galilée, 2002
- —. *La Carte postale, de Socrate à Freud et au-delà*. Coll. La philosophie en effet. Paris : Flammarion, 1980
- —. « Circonfession », in Geoffrey Bennington et Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, Paris, Seuil, « Les Contemporains », 1991
- —. *Circonfession* [Doc. sonore]: *texte intégral lu par l'auteur*. Collection Des femmes (Bibliothèque des voix), 2005, 5 CD's (5h 35min), recording made in 1993
- —. « Composing “Circumfession.” » In *Augustine and postmodernism: confessions and circumfession* / edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2005
- —. *De l'Esprit, Heidegger et la question*. Paris : Galilée, 1987. *Of Spirit, Heidegger and the Question*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Richel Bowbly. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- —. *La Dissémination*. Coll. Points. Paris : Seuil, 1972 ; *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.



- —. *Donner le Temps. I. La Fausse Monnaie*, Paris, Galilée, 1991
- —. *L'Écriture et la différence*. Paris : Seuil, 1967
- —. *Feu la cendre*, Paris : Des femmes, 1987
- —. *Force de loi*, Paris, Galilée, 1994
- —. *Glas*. Paris : Galilée, 1974
- —. *De la grammatologie*. Coll. « Critique ». Paris : Minuit, 1967
- —. *Khora. On the Name Jacques Derrida* Edited by Thomas Dutoit. Translated by David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1995.
- —. *Marges de la philosophie*. Coll. « Critique ». Paris : Minuit, 1972
- —. *Mémoires d'aveugle : l'autoportrait et autres ruines*. Paris : Réunion des musées nationaux, 1990
- —. *L'Oreille de l'autre : otobiographies, transferts, traductions : textes et départs avec Jacques Derrida*. Montréal : VLB, 1982
- —. *Papier machine : le ruban de machine à écrire et autres réponses* (Paris: Galilée, 2001)
- —. *Points de suspension*, Paris, Galilée, 1992
- —. *Positions*. Paris : Minuit, 1972
- —. *Psyché : inventions de l'autre*. Paris : Galilée, 1987
- —. *Résistances, de la psychanalyse*. Coll. La philosophie en effet. Paris : Galilée, 1996
- Diderot, Denis. *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien*. Précédé de *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*. Paris: Flammarion, 1981
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: (The Standard Edition)* (V. 1-24)
- —. "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage." *Psychoanal Q.*, 11: (1942). 459-464.
- Freudenthal, Gad. *Artistotle's theory of material substance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Grotowski, Jerzy and Barba, Eugino. *Towards a Poor Theater*. Routledge, 1 edition, 2002.
- Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: Life of Samuel Beckett*. A Touchston Book: New York, 1996
- Koltès, Bernard-Marie. *Les Amertumes* (1970), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1998
- —. *Combat de nègre et de chiens* (1979), suivi des *Carnets*, Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1989
- —. *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* (1985), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1986
- —. *L'Héritage* (1972), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1998
- —. *Le Jour des meurtres dans l'histoire d'Hamlet* (1974), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 2006
- —. *Lettres*, Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 2009
- —. *La Marche* (1970), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 2003
- —. *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*. Tapuscrit de Théâtre Ouvert (1977), éditions Stock (1978), les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1988
- —. *Une part de ma vie*, les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1999
- —. *Procès Ivre* (1971), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 2001
- —. *Prologue*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1991
- —. *Quai Ouest* (1985), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1985

- —. *Récits morts. Un rêve égaré* (1973), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 2008
- —. *Le Retour au désert* (1988), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1988
- —. *Sallinger* (1977), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1998
- —. *Des Voix sourdes* (1974), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 2008
- —. *Roberto Zucco* (1988), suivi de *Tabataba* (1986), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1990
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. “Le paradoxe et la mimesis” (1979). *Limitation des Modernes*. Paris: Galilée, 1986) 15-36.
- —. “Theatrum Analyticum” in Murray, Timothy, ed., *Mimesis, Masochism and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, Michigan: University of Michigan, 1997.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits*. Paris : Seuil, 1966
- —. *La Méprise du sujet supposé savoir* prononcée à l’Institut français de Naples le 14 décembre 1967 fut publié dans *Scilicet*, n° 1, pp. 31-41.
- —. *Le séminaire, Livre VII: L’Ethique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*, (texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller). Paris: Seuil, 1986
- —. *Le séminaire, Livre VIII: Le transfert, 1960-1961*, (texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller). Paris: Seuil, 1991
- —. *Le Séminaire, Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse, 1964*, (texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller). Paris: Seuil, 1973
- Leclair, Serge. *On tue un enfant*, Seuil, Paris, 1981.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatischen Theater*, Francfort-sur-le-Main, 1999.  
*Postdramatic Theatre*. translated and with an introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, London and New York 2006.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *La Condition postmoderne*. Coll. « Critique ». Paris : Minuit, 1979
- —. *Economie libidinale*. Paris: Minuit, 1974
- —. *Le Différend*. . Paris : Minuit, 1984.
- —. *Discours, figure*. Paris : Klincksieck, 1972
- —. *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*. Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1973
- —. *L’Inhumain : causeries sur le temps*. Paris : Galilée, 1988
- —. *Lectures d’enfance*. Paris : Galilée, 1991
- —. *Misère de la philosophie*. Paris : Galilée, 2000
- —. « Par-delà la représentation. » (Preface). In Anton Ehrenzweig, Francine Lacoue-Labarthe and Claire Nancy (Translation). *L’Ordre caché de l’art: essai sur la psychologie de l’imagination artistique*. Collection “Connaissance de l’inconscient,” 22. Paris : Gallimard, 1974. Jonathan Culler (Translation). “Beyond Representation.” *Human Context* 7/3. 1975, pp. 495-502.
- —. *La Phénoménologie*. Coll. Que sais-je ? Paris : P.U.F., 1954
- —. *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants : Correspondance 1982-1985*. Paris : LGF/Galilée, 1988
- —. “The Unconscious as Mise-en-scene,” *Performance in postmodern culture*. Madison : Coda Press, 1977
- —. « Voix », in *Lectures d’enfance*, Paris : Gallilée : 1991, pp.129-153
- Mannoni, Dominique-Octave. *Clefs pour l’imaginaire*. Paris: Le Seuil, 1969

- Marder, Elissa. "The Mother Tongue in Phèdre and Frankenstein." *Yale French Studies*, No. 76, *Autour de Racine: Studies in Intertextuality*. (1989), 59-77.
- Müller, Heiner. *Hamletmachine and other texts for stage*. Ed. And trans. by Carl Weber. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.
- Nouvet, Claire. *Enfances Narcisse*. Paris : Galilée, 2009.
- Novarina, Valère. *L'Acte inconnu*. Paris: P.O.L, 2007
- —. *Devant la parole*. Paris: P.O.L, 1999.
- —. *Le Discours aux animaux*. Paris: P.O.L, 1987
- —. *Le Drame de la vie*. Paris: P.O.L, 1984
- —. *L'Envers de l'esprit*. Paris: P.O.L, forthcoming
- —. "L'homme hors de lui, » in *Europe*, N 880-881/Août-Septembre 2002
- —. *Lumières du corps*. Paris: P.O.L, 2006
- —. *L'Origine rouge*, POL, 2000
- —. *La Scène*. Paris: P.O.L, 2003.
- —. *Théâtre*, contenant « L'Atelier volant », « Le Babil des classes dangereuses », « Le Monologue d'Adramélech », « La Lutte des morts », « Falstafe ». Paris: P.O.L, 1989
- —. *Le Théâtre des paroles*. 2ème édition. Paris: P.O.L, 2007
- Ovid, "Narcissus and Echo," in *Metamorphosis*, trans. A.D. Melville, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Plato. *Republic*. Trans. B. Jowett. New York: The Modern library.
- —. *Symposium*. Trans. by Alexander Nehamas, and Paul Woodruff. New York: Hackett Pub Co Inc, 1989
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Confessions*. Paris, Editions Gallimard, 2009.
- Salino, Brigitte. *Bernard-Marie Koltès*, Stock, 2009.
- Sarrazac, Jean-Pierre. *Poétique du drame moderne et contemporain, Lexique d'une recherché*. Paris: Université de Paris III, Belgique, Louvain-la-neuve, 2001.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1959
- Sophocles. *The Oedipus Cycle: Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*. Trans. by Dudley Fitts, and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Harvest Books, 2002
- Weber, Samuel. *Theatricality as Medium*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004
- Williams, Jeffrey. "The Death of Deconstruction, the End of Theory, and Other Ominous Rumors," *Narrative*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Jan., 1996)