1. Human voice and the sounds of Nature

Beckett’s dramas, especially his earlier works, often feature a dichotomy between human and nature. In his first radio drama, *All That Fall*, the voices and the sounds of the characters are heard intermingled with nature sounds. And another radio drama, *Embers*, has the protagonist named Henry, whose voice is, as the play proceeds, gradually swallowed by the sounds of sea. In these plays, human voices, in contrast with unchangeable sounds of nature, are suggested as declining and weak. And, in his most well-known drama, *Waiting for Godot* (I), the correlation between human voices and natural sounds is apparent.

The main characters of this play are two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for a man named Godot. The stage displays a street and a tree. Godot never comes, therefore their playing and chattering to kill time while waiting are foreground, emphasizing their hollowness and insignificance. The drama is partitioned into two acts. Vladimir and Estragon in Act Two repeat their stupidities done in Act One. There seem to be almost no setting-change from Act One to Two. However there is one change to the desolate stage and that is the tree. The tree, leafless in Act One, has four or five leaves in Act Two. In this bleak and desolate scene, only the tree expresses life’s circulation which is contrasted with the characters’ repetitious and sterile behaviors. On the other hand, all the characters except Vladimir, in Act Two, forget the things that have happened in Act 1. This obliviousness, which causes their repetitive trifles, is indicated in the following exchanges that occur between Vladimir and Estragon:

Vladimir: [...]I was saying that things have changed here since yesterday.
Estragon: Everything oozes.
V: Look at the tree.
E: It’s never the same pus from one second to the next.
V: The tree, look at the tree.
E: Was it not there yesterday?
V: Yes, of course that it was there. Do you not remember? […]
E: You dreamt it.
V: Is it possible that you’ve forgotten already?
E: That’s the way I am. Either I forget immediately or I never forget. (CDW. p.56)

This scene clearly forms a contrast between nature and man. The tree has changed but has been there since Act One. And it can be symbolized as not only being fluid but also substantive. In contrast, the characters, especially those such as Estragon, are insuccessive and fragmentary, because their memories cannot associate two consecutive days. What has happened in Act One is not inscribed in their memories, and they can never depend on their memories for their own full beings like the tree. This means that the time they are living is different from the natural time implied by the tree (2). “Everything’s dead but the tree.” (CDW. p.87), as Vladimir says. Excluded from the continuous flow of time in nature, the tramps, in Act Two, reiterate almost the same things done in Act One. Their dissociation from nature is apparent to themselves. Thus Estragon’s remark: “We should turn resolutely towards Nature.” However, Vladimir immediately, to which replies: “We’ve tried that.”(CDW p.60).

John Fletcher indicates, their repetition is not only to do the same thing exactly twice, but to lead them to weakness and poverty: in Act Two, Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky dumb. (3) Moreover the contrast between nature and man emphasizes the latter’s weakness and decline. In All That Fall, surrounded by natural sounds, the characters are struggling with a dead language. One of the characters, Dan Rooney says to his wife, Maddy: “Do you know, Maddy, sometimes one would think you were struggling with a dead language.” (CDW. p.194). Vladimir and Estragon’s conversation indicates that there are the voices similar to Maddy’s around them:

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silence.
Vladimir: You’re right. We’re inexhaustible.
E: It’s so we won’t think.
V: We have that excuse.
E: It’s so we won’t hear.
V: We have our reason.
E: All the dead voices.
V: They make a noise like wings.
E: Like leaves.
V: Like sand.
E: Like leaves. (CDW. p.58. emphasis added.)

What surround them are “all the dead voices”, which have gotten mixed up with natural sounds (“like wings./Like leaves./Like sand./Like leaves”). But we must note that they incite thinking. The reason Vladimir and Estragon will not hear them is that “they won’t think”. Therefore, “all the dead voices” are never completely inarticulate and nonverbal noises like natural sounds. They are understood as sounds losing their capacity for significance which they would possess as human voices, becoming indistinguishable from natural sounds. “All the dead voices”, in other words, are sounds which retain the traces of human voices. Although devoid of signification, they have not fallen into inarticulate and nonverbal sounds yet. It is more correct to understand “all the dead voices” as dying rather than completely dead.

Whereas Vladimir and Estragon’s chatterings are made not to hear dead voices and to escape the thinking imposed by them, their own insignificant words are easily expected to become another “all the dead voices”. So later in Act Two, Vladimir will deplore: “We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries.” (CDW p.84. Emphasis added). In short, “all the dead voices”, in a paradoxical way, induce their chattering, which subsequently becomes another “all the dead voices”. “All the dead voices” constitute a collective economy into which all the voices are drowned and all the words are doomed to be dying(it is not dead). But, unlike natural life, the economy of “all the dead voices” is not flowing. As soon as emitted, voices are just piled up around the characters. They are neither completely extinguishable nor retrievable.

Surrounded by “all the dead voices” or sounds with traces of signification work, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot. What induces them to chatter
is the sounds of “all the dead voices”. Rather than speak, “they rustle”, “they make a noise like feathers”/ “Like leaves”/ “Like ashes” (CDW. p.58) to confront them with the traces of signification work. Their imminence is described by the following conversation between the characters.

Vladimir: What is terrible is to have thought.
Estragon: But did that ever happen to us?
V: Where are all these corpses from?
E: These skeletons.
[...]
V: We must have thought a little.
E: At the very beginning.
V: A charnel-house! A charnel-house! (CDW. p.60. italics by Beckett.)

“Skeletons” and “corps” can be understood as another version of “all the dead voices”. These materialized words emphasize more the hollowness of lost voices. These lines seem to be wanting, like the rest of this drama, in logical reasoning. But, by the analogy with “all the dead voices”, it can be inferred that the “corps and skeletons”, surrounding Vladimir and Estragon, impose thoughts on them. They cannot escape thoughts, not because they are thinking now, but because they have thought. The fact that the characters have once thought, inscribes the indelible traces of signification work which confine them to thoughts.

2. The dominance of the words

Vladimir and Estragon continue their idle talk because they do not want to hear “all the dead voices”, and they avoid “all the dead voice” because they want to escape thoughts imposed by dead voices. But, then, why not go away and leave the place? What chains them to the act of waiting there? To answer this, we need to use another approach: Exploring through “all the dead voices” and investigating what has happened before Vladimir and Estragon began waiting. In short, examining what left the inscription is to be inspected, inscription to make them wait.

Inscription is also found shadowing the protagonist in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The Ghost informs his son of his brother’s (Claudius’s) murder and commands
him to avenge his death, saying “Remember me”, to which Hamlet replies:

> Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost. While memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, yes, by heaven.

[...]
So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word:
It’s ‘Adieu, adieu remember me’.
I have sworn’t. (4)

As the phrase “Remember thee?” is transformed into “remember me”, the words of the ghost are inscribed “within the book and volume of my brain”, and Hamlet calls attention to this inscription by saying “Now to my word”. From this moment, he is doomed to live with these words for the rest of the drama. What is called the depression of Hamlet should not be interpreted as his inborn flaw. Rather, it is produced by a split between him and the other’s words and thus should be understood as a symptom of the crisis of his identity which is invaded by the other’s words. These internalized words themselves spectrally haunt and confuse Hamlet. In addition, Oedious in Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* can be enumerated here, who is given the oracle from Phoebus and whose action subsequently is to be dominated by it. And the protagonist in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* infused by witches’ words of slaughter is also among them (5). All the heroes mentioned here, in short, are dominated by the other’s words.

*Waiting for Godot* features the similar characters dominated by the preceding words. Vladimir and Estragon are on the street near the tree in order to keep a promise with Godot. But the audiences cannot witness the moment of enunciation of their promise, because the promise is made before the start of the drama. It is
only known from the vague memory of Vladimir and Estragon. In other words, "Godot exists only in language through his ‘presence of the absence’", as Kim writes (8). Godot is uncertain to come, and the place and the time to meet him are indefinite, too. Moreover, they seem not to know what they promised to do:

Estragon: What exactly did we ask him for?
Vladimir: Were you not there?
E: I can’t have been listening.
V: Oh...nothing very definite. (CDW. p.19)

As the above lines clarify, the tramps do not remember the contents of their promise with Godot. What they remember is to have made a mistake (7). The promise is obscure, but despite which, Vladimir and Estragon continue waiting. This obscurity is contrasted with that of Oedipus the King. In the latter, the obscurity of the oracle motivates the hero’s dramatic action and attracts toward its secret. Oedipus accumulates others’ words, such as evidence, which are piled up around the oracle, getting rid of its obscureness and clearing the way for their full meanings.

In Waiting for Godot, however, unlike in Oedipus the King, the character’s actions and words never lead to the clarification of the other’s words, namely Godot’s. The revealment of his words is out of their reach, since Vladimir and Estragon do not (more exactly, they cannot, as we shall see later) make an attempt to know the exact place nor time and to disclose the promise’s content. But we cannot blame them for their passivity. For their passivity is, in a paradoxical way, caused by the very words of Godot. It is because they are willing to keep their promise with Godot that they cannot advance and venture, but must remain in a stagnation. In this sense, what Kim remarks: “what the two tramps are actually dominated by is Godot’s discourse —— the discourse of the Other” (8), is right. But her view is lacking in the element of Godot’s words’ double-bindness. His promise, while, on the one hand, like any promise, dictates its accomplishment, on the other hand never reveals its content and forbids any approach to itself. It is in this trap of the double-bind of Godot’s words that Vladimir and Estragon are caught. As long as the content of the promise is obscure, they have to wait without knowing for what they are really waiting. In other words, they are dominated, not
knowing by what they are dominated. There is the ultimate obedience in the tramps’ waiting.

Vladimir and Estragon’s words emitted while waiting are never leading to the verification, but just heap up around them like wrecks. Their insignificant and trivial chattering is caught up into the collective economy of “all the dead voices”, filling up their surrounding. So it can be said that this collective economy is initiated by Godot’s words. His promise, though invisible, induces their chattering and makes it caught up in the collective economy of “all the dead voices”.

Vladimir and Estragon’s attempt not to hear “all the dead voices” is to forget the promise with him. But once Godot’s voices are heard, they are not indelible like a fact with thought. The promise without content is a skeletal word which rustles around them like leaves.

3. Habit

We have, so far, investigated the condition imposed on the characters. Up to this point, all the essays and articles on Waiting for Godot are content to expatiate on the character’s conjuncture and suffering. This reading can also possibly be called an expatiation reading. This is to detail the conditions from which the characters are restricted, and to describe the clear predicament into which they fall. In this view, what Vladimir and Estragon do are effects dragged automatically from their circumstance, and they do nothing else but things to endure their miserableness and to kill time.

But I cannot be content with the expatiation reading. In my view, characters’ behaviours are not to be confined to effects. Their actions are certainly restrained by their conditions, but in their limited behaviour, they try to change the circumstances. Therefore we try to delve into the characters’ seeming trivial actions for a possibility to grapple with these circumstances.

Although Vladimir and Estragon seem to be passive and inert, they hold strategy against their surrounding, against the collective economy of “all the dead voices” and against the dominance of the other’s words. As mentioned before, their chattering not to hear rustles around them is to disconnect themselves from the surrounding sounds and shut themselves up in their own world. This dichotomy between the outerworld and the innerworld was already prefigured in Beckett’s youthful and somewhat pedantic essay, Proust. 

7
Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. [...] Habit then is the genetic term for the treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. (P. p.8)

Beckett continues, quoting Proust’s own words: “If Habit [...] is a second nature, it keeps us in ignorance of the first” (P. p.11), subsequently states:

Unfortunately Habit has laid its veto on this form of perception, its action being precisely to hide the essence— the Idea— of the object in the haze of conception— preconception. (P. p.11)

Habit is therefore the strategy of enclosure in “a second nature” from “the Idea”. Habit’s “veto” on perception is, in another sense, a protection from the environment.

Whereas habit in this essay is a somewhat negative concept, it can be seen in a positive form in Waiting for Godot. It is not surprising that Vladimir and Estragon depend on this strategy for protection. Vladimir says:

All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which— how shall I say— which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering. No doubt. But has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths? (CDW. p.75)

A dictionary meaning of “habit” is “thing that a person does often and almost without thinking” (10). Their trivialities proceed (regress) from “reasonable” to habit. Vladimir say, “habit is a great deadender” (CDW. p.84). What they anticipate from habit is to be able to be “without thinking” or to deaden thinking. Thus Vladimir’s remark: “This is really becoming insignificant” (CDW. p.64). They long to be confined in “insignificance” and to forget everything including
Godot’s promise. As for becoming a habit, their behaviour is deprived of its finality. Vladimir says: “We are no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for . . . waiting.” (CDW. p.72)(10).

In this sense, therefore, the characters’ chattering is the strategy of habit to deaden “all the dead voices”. Vladimir and Estragon keep chattering to drown out the surrounding sounds. They make for complete deafness. As Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky dumb, they try to be enclosed in a deaf world of their own voices. But sounds never stop rustling and manage to break through into their ears. Moreover, their own voices are caught up in the vicious circle of “all the dead voices”, which give evidence for the fact of thought. Voices, whether live or dead, make them unable to forget the enactment of Godot. The oblivion is so imperfect that they cannot escape the thought and Godot’s words. The reason they cannot leave the place is not because they try to keep a promise, but because they cannot forget the promise completely. Although there is “nothing to be done”, they “haven’t yet tried everything” (CDW. p.11), that is, their habit does not deaden every signification.

Vladimir and Estragon’s habit is to go away from the enactment of the other into “a second nature”, that is, the reenactment of their own. On the one hand, “all the dead voices” reminded them of the lost voices and lost thoughts, recalling Godot’s enactment to which they have been tied without knowing what it was. On the other hand, Vladimir and Estragon produce their seclusion by repeating routine works, which is to be distilled into the “habit” where all their behaviours are done without thinking. To reinforce this view, the reading of Stanley Cavell, an American philosopher, is pertinent. He says about *Endgame*:

Now we are to know that salvation lies in reversing the story, in ending the story of the end, dismantling Eschatology, ending this world of order in order to reverse the curse of the world laid on it its Judeo-Christian end. Only a life without hope, meaning, justification, waiting, solution— as we have been shaped for these things— is free from the curse of God.(12)

“Reversing the story” or “dismantling Eschatology” is for Vladimir and Estragon the escape from the other’s enactment. With “a life without hope, meaning, justification, waiting, solution”, they try to deprive themselves of signification
imposed by the other's enactment and take refuge in insignificance which will constitute their own reenactment. For this, the tramps depend on habit, which makes Vladimir and Estragon's habitation. Their strategy is: "to undo all covenants and to secure fruitlessness" and "to become un-created".\(^{(13)}\)

Vladimir says that "in an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness" (CDW. p.75). In spite of complete oblivion or "fruitlessness" ("in the midst of nothingness"), they alone will exist, as "un-created", which enables them to reenact (represent) themselves.

Towards the end of Act One, the boy comes to tell Vladimir and Estragon that Godot will not come. This is repeated towards the end of Act Two as well, but this time the boy's words are dragged out of him by Vladimir (CDW. p.85). It indicates that the tramps already know that Godot will not come. Despite this, they must wait because what they are really waiting for is nothingness, where they can escape from Godot's enactment.

This is opposed to John Fletcher's view, which suggests that in this play "Each character, though distinct, now and then drops his individuality and speaks in the 'impersonal voice'".\(^{(14)}\) In subsequence, in his view, all the characters are to fall into the same substance and "between a human being's life and a mayfly's there is, in the last analysis, little to choose".\(^{(15)}\)

However, in my view, contrary to the drop of individuality, the escape from the other's enactment will lead to the reenactment of their own being. Vladimir and Estragon, instead of being "impersonal", aim at their representation by themselves. In this move, Godot is being made into a hypothetical point to prop their act of waiting. Therefore I agree with Simon Critchley, a British philosopher, who in the excellent essays on literature says:

What Beckett's work offers us, then, is a radical de-creation of these salvific narratives, a paring down or stripping away of the resorts of fable, the determinate negation of social meaning through the elevation of form, a syntax of weakness, an approach to meaninglessness as an achievement of the ordinary without the rose-tinted glasses of redemption[...]\(^{(16)}\)

The world is created meaningful. All the trivialities that Vladimir and Estragon have practiced in this play are attempts to "de-create" this world, to approach
“meaninglessness” and to reenact their act of waiting. As Critchley wisely tells, what Vladimir and Estragon try through habit is to skeletonize the content of their behaviour and elevate its form. It is not until in “meaninglessness” that it is possible for the characters to reenact themselves.

In this play, however, their reenactment is not present but appears as a possibility. What is offered is the process and attempt, that is, strategy. As long as “all the dead voices” are heard, the tramps cannot help recalling the skeletons of Godot’s words and cannot escape the other’s enactment. They neither arrive at nothingness to reenact themselves nor play back Godot’s live voices. Vladimir and Estragon are suspended between the enactment and reenactment. However, although impossible to go on, they are always making invisible progress toward nothingness, as a speaker says in Beckett’s contemporaneous prose, The Unnamable: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”(17) From this impossibility, which means meaningfullness of the world, Beckett’s drama starts like a squirm in the purgatory for nothingness.

Note


(5) About the comparison between the word’s dominance in Hamlet or other classics and that of Beckett, see Charles R. Lyons. “Perceiving Rockaby — As a Text by
Samuel Beckett, As a Text for Performance.” *Comparative Drama.* 16. (Number 4. Win. 1982–83). pp.297–311, see esp. pp.309–11. According to Lyons, whereas the classics are characterized by the relation between the characters and the other’s words dominating them, Beckett’s works are characterized by the relation between the actors/actress and their lines. They are forced to speak huge lines in the restrictive manner and intensely bound to the words of the author. To be brief, in classics, word’s domination is horizontal in the text level, and in Beckett, it is vertical in the performance level.


(7) Kim. p.26. :”Godot did not promise except his coming.”


(9) *Proust.* (New York: Grove Press, 1931). Quotes from this book will be henceforth abbreviated as P.


(13) Ibid. p.140. Although this is statement about Endgame, it can be applicable to *Waiting for Godot*. For the world-view offered by the former is not different from the latter, whereas their structures are so.


(15) Ibid. p.50.
