

PAROLE RUBATE

RIVISTA INTERNAZIONALE
DI STUDI SULLA CITAZIONE



PURLOINED LETTERS

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF QUOTATION STUDIES

Rivista semestrale online / Biannual online journal

<http://www.parolerubate.unipr.it>

Fascicolo n. 27 / Issue no. 27

Giugno 2023 / June 2023

Rivista fondata da / Journal founded by

Rinaldo Rinaldi (Università di Parma)

Direttori / Editors

Nicola Catelli (Università di Parma)

Corrado Confalonieri (Università di Parma)

Comitato scientifico / Research Committee

Mariolina Bongiovanni Bertini (Università di Parma)

Francesca Borgo (University of St Andrews / Bibliotheca Hertziana)

Gabriele Bucchi (Universität Basel)

Dominique Budor (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3)

Loredana Chines (Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)

Elena Fratto (Princeton University)

Luca Graverini (Università di Siena)

Roberto Greci (Università di Parma)

Michele Guerra (Università di Parma)

Heinz Hofmann (Universität Tübingen)

Bert W. Meijer (Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Instituut Firenze / Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht)

Elisabetta Menetti (Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia)

María de las Nieves Muñoz Muñoz (Universitat de Barcelona)

Katharina Natalia Piechocki (The University of British Columbia)

Eugenio Refini (New York University)

Marco Rispoli (Università degli Studi di Padova)

Matteo Residori (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3)

Irene Romera Pintor (Universitat de València)

Emilio Russo (Sapienza Università di Roma)

Diego Saglia (Università di Parma)

Francesco Spera (Università degli Studi di Milano)

Carlo Varotti (Università di Parma)

Enrica Zanin (Université de Strasbourg)

Segreteria di redazione / Editorial Staff

Giandamiano Bovi (Università di Parma)

Maria Elena Capitani (Università di Parma)

Simone Forlesi (Università di Pisa)

Francesco Gallina (Università di Parma)

Arianna Giardini (Università degli Studi di Milano)

Chiara Rolli (Università di Parma)

Esperti esterni (fascicolo n. 27) / External referees (issue no. 27)

Angela Andreani (Università degli Studi di Milano)

Gioia Angeletti (Università di Parma)

Maurizio Ascari (Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)

Omar Ashem Abdo Khalaf (Università degli Studi di Padova)

Stefano Manferlotti (Emerito – Università di Napoli Federico II)

Diego Saglia (Università di Parma)

Sara Soncini (Università di Pisa)

Emanuel Stelzer (Università di Verona)

Progetto grafico / Graphic design

Jelena Radojev (Università di Parma) †

Direttore responsabile: Nicola Catelli

Autorizzazione Tribunale di Parma n. 14 del 27 maggio 2010

© Copyright 2023 – ISSN: 2039-0114

INDEX / CONTENTS

Speciale Shakespeare

“SACRO SPECCHIO DELLA MODA”: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, VOCE DEL POTERE /
“A GLASS OF GODLY FORM”: SHAKESPEARE AS THE VOICE OF ESTABLISHED POWER

Editors Giuliana Iannaccaro and Alessandra Petrina

- Introduction: Empowering Shakespeare*
GIULIANA IANACCARO (Università degli Studi di Milano) 3-9
- “The Boers or the English... that is not the Question”:
The Shakespearean Tragedy in Herbert Dhlomo’s “Dingane”*
GIULIANA IANACCARO (Università degli Studi di Milano) 11-37
- “Shakespeare in Time of War”:
teatro e propaganda durante la Grande guerra*
LUIGI MARFÈ (Università degli Studi di Padova) 39-59
- Shakespearean Fragments to Define and Mourn Englishness
in “Mrs Dalloway” and “Her Privates We”*
MARIA GRAZIA DONGU (Università degli Studi di Cagliari) 61-85
- “We’ve had quite a Shakespearean evening, haven’t we?”:
Shakespeare and Dorothy Sayers*
ALESSANDRA PETRINA (Università degli Studi di Padova) 87-111
- “It must be by his death”: “I, Cinna (The Poet)”
and the Appropriation of Shakespeare’s Ghostly Voice*
ANDREA PEGHINELLI (Sapienza Università di Roma) 113-135
- Shakespeare, the Father of English?
A Review of the Vocabulary Question*
IOLANDA PLESCIA (Sapienza Università di Roma) 137-160

MATERIALI / MATERIALS

- Intrusion and Presence of the Author in Samuel Beckett’s “The Unnamable”
and B. S. Johnson’s “Albert Angelo”*
DANIELE CORRADI (Università di Parma) 163-193



DANIELE CORRADI

**INTRUSION AND PRESENCE OF THE AUTHOR
IN SAMUEL BECKETT’S “THE UNNAMABLE”
AND B. S. JOHNSON’S “ALBERT ANGELO”**

1. *Introduction*

Towards the conclusion of his perhaps best-known novel *Albert Angelo* (1964), the avant-garde British writer Bryan Stanley Johnson (1933-1973) employs a fairly stunning device, consisting in the direct and violent intrusion, as is famously claimed, of the author himself – not his textual projection, not an abstract authorial voice, but the true B.S. Johnson in his historical tangibility – into the narrated world, thus disrupting the novelistic illusion so far sustained of the autonomous identity of the protagonist, Albert, and causing the whole edifice of the novel to collapse. With this “almighty aposiopesis”¹ (defined indeed as an abrupt interruption of the discourse) the author vents out all his frustration at the inadequacy of Albert – an architect *manqué* trying to earn his living as a supply teacher –

¹ B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, London, Picador, 2013, p. 167.

as an objective correlative of what the author really wishes to express, that is admittedly his existential predicament of “being a poet in a world where only poets care anything real about poetry”.²

As a theoretical justification, or inspiration, to such extreme move Johnson appropriates a passage taken from Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* – a text dealing, among other things, with the same issue of the possible presence of the author in his own textual world –, employing it as opening epigraph to *Albert Angelo*. In this passage, the apparently acousmatic voice of the unnamable narrator, constantly searching for its impossible identity, its irretrievable point of origin, briefly but decisively considers the possibility of coinciding with that of the physical person of the external author, which apparently convinces him of the necessity to discard all those false identities, all those figures of textual lieutenants he has been hiding behind up to that moment in order to concentrate exclusively on himself, the author, the true implied subject of all that has been said.

Such passage – taken, to be fair, quite outside a context which is infinitely more complex than this – is apparently assumed by Johnson as a pivotal and authoritative justification in support not only of the major device at the core of his novel, but for a general autobiographical turn, “towards truth and away from storytelling”,³ that he chooses to impress into his own writing from this point onward, a turn which will indelibly associate him with the infamous motto “telling stories is telling lies”.⁴ This latter suggestion, however paraphrased and incorporated into a wider and

² *Ibid.*, p. 168.

³ B. S. Johnson, review of S. Beckett, *How It Is*, in “The Spectator”, 26 June 1964, p. 22.

⁴ The original phrase is taken from *Albert Angelo*, but is then used and paraphrased *ad nauseam* in almost any discussion about Johnson and his work, more often than not by the author himself.

more articulated aesthetical vision, is incidentally present already in Beckett,⁵ and it is not after all a surprise that Johnson should have resorted to Beckett in his search for an ideological backing for his own novelistic practice, given the enormous importance that the Irish master has for Johnson and the almost obsessive admiration he feels for him – Beckett is indeed for Johnson admittedly “the greatest prose stylist and the most original writer living”,⁶ and Beckett’s name crops up inevitably as an omnipresent avatar whenever Johnson sets out explaining his own views on the novel, or when he illustrates the literary lineage he feels part and continuation of.⁷

It is not however necessary to delve much deep into this matter to recognise that the aesthetic exploration of this crucial suggestion implicit in Beckett’s passage – the suggestion, that is, that the external author can possibly substantiate himself without mediation within the textual

⁵ In *The Unnamable*, for instance, the narrating voice dismisses one after the other all the identities that are tentatively imposed on it from the outside, recognising itself as other, and the stories of these impossible biographies as lies. In later works there are similar dynamics, with the term “lies” being alternatively substituted with “balls” (*How It Is*) or “fable” (*Company*). In all these texts, the narration of stories is always seen inevitably to alienate the teller from the ultimate truth about himself, an aspect that lies at the core of Johnson’s writing as well.

⁶ Johnson’s appreciation for Beckett’s work crops up transparently in many of his pronouncements, the most enthusiastic being perhaps a 1967 review of Beckett’s collection *No’s Knife* which appeared in “The New Statesman”: “We it is who, reading him, feel the urge not for interpretation, but for celebration, not exegesis but exultation that anyone can write so well. [...] He is the greatest prose stylist and the most original writer living. [...] To have written as he has [...] is remarkable to the point of impossibility” (B. S. Johnson, review of *No’s Knife* (Calder & Boyars), *Eh Joe and Other Writings* (Faber) and *Beckett at 60: A Festschrift* (Calder & Boyars), in Id., *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson*, edited by J. Coe, P. Tew and J. Jordan, London, Picador, 2013, p. 426).

⁷ In a cover letter addressed to George Greenfield, for instance, who was to become his first literary agent, Johnson presents the manuscript of his novel *Travelling People* as being “in the tradition represented by writers such as Petronius, Apuleius, Rabelais, Cervantes, Nashe, Sterne, and Samuel Beckett” (see B. S. Johnson to G. Greenfield, 18 October 1961, in J. Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson*, London, Picador, 2004, p. 116).

dimension – yields completely different results in the works of Johnson and Beckett, and that the two novels under examination here, as well as their authors' subsequent production, present in this connection many more divergences than similarities. To be more precise, what appears in Beckett's text to be merely an accidental and precarious suggestion in a continuing chain of contradictory reasoning, a flux of "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later",⁸ is elevated in Johnson to the status of a universal assumption, providing with the sole strength of its truth the foundations of a large aesthetical project, comprising a diverse range of texts written across the years.

The contention of this contribution, in brief, is thus not only that the obvious comparison between Beckett and Johnson can be carried out much more fruitfully with a special view towards their differences, rather than exploring the allegedly common premises their respective novels might seem superficially to stem from, but also, and perhaps more interestingly, that what has become an all-important ideological point of passage in Johnson's writing career would appear to be based on a partial, if not deliberately distorted interpretation of Beckett's message, at least as far as *The Unnamable* is concerned. Far from providing grounds for a condemnation or debasement of Johnson's literary achievements, however, this alleged misinterpretation might actually be regarded, on the contrary, as the very reason why Johnson's work can be said to convey some crucial and groundbreaking new thoughts about the novel, as well as bring to the form an original contribution which would probably not have been of the same validity and interest had Johnson merely followed blindly in the steps of his own master.

⁸ S. Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in Id., *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, New York, Grove Press, 2009, p. 285.

In light of these premises, then, an attentive analysis of this issue of the presence of the author in Johnson's and Beckett's texts is called for: first, it will be necessary to explore the situation of the narrating voice in *The Unnamable*, with particular attention to the relationship between the external author and his various textual intermediaries; another section will then account for the case of *Albert Angelo* and the peculiar position of its author, as well as the nature of his alleged intrusion into the dimension of the novel. Finally, the context of Johnson's personal and problematic appropriation of Beckett's text will be explored, in an attempt to draw a comparison and establish the nature of the discrepancy between these two authors' responses to a similar problem, in the context of these two texts and with a view towards their subsequent works that develop and work on the same idea.

2. *Partitions: The Case of "The Unnamable"*

"When I think, that is to say, no, let it stand, when I think of the time I've wasted with these brain-dips, beginning with Murphy, who wasn't even the first, when I had me, on the premises, within easy reach, tottering under my own skin and bones, real ones, rotting with solitude and neglect, till I doubted my own existence, and even still, today, I have no faith in it, none, so that I have to say, when I speak, Who speaks, and seek, and so on and similarly for all the other things that happen to me and for which someone must be found, for things that happen must have someone to happen to, someone must stop them. But Murphy and the others, and last but not least the two old buffers here present, could not stop them, the things that happened to me, and nothing else either, there is nothing else, let us be lucid for once, nothing else but what happens to me, such as speaking, and such as seeking, and which cannot happen to me, which prowl round me, like bodies in torment, the torment of no abode, no repose, no, like hyenas, screeching and laughing, no, no better, no matter, I've shut my doors against them, I'm not at home to anything, my doors are shut against them, perhaps that's how I'll find silence, and peace at last, by opening my doors and letting myself be devoured, they'll stop howling, they'll start eating, the maws now howling. Open up, open up, you'll be alright, you'll see."⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 384 (also used as epigraph to B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, cit.).

It is undoubtedly no easy task to find a single quotation, within the pages of *The Unnamable*, which would be capable of expressing all the complexities, the contradictions and the paradoxes present in such a text. The one above, anyway, can be certainly said to tackle one of its core problems, namely that of the identity or source of the impalpable narrating voice, for which a possessor is constantly sought throughout the novel – the narration opens indeed with the trilemma “Who now? Where now? When now?”,¹⁰ the exploration of whose consequences will extend to the rest of its pages, after a first tentative answer is given: “I, say I, unbelieving”.¹¹ Thus, from the very beginning, the effervescent bundle of unshaped narrative material that passes itself – with many reserves – for the I of the narration¹² appears engaged in the attempt to solve, solely through the unbroken and unstoppable torrent of words it is traversed by and on which it feeds, the terrible conundrum of its own existence.

The ‘me’ of the passage above appears then to be a matter of some crucial intricacy, one that tends to elude any simple solution. ‘Me’ is after all just another pronoun, and it is the voice itself that recognises the unreliability and messy interchangeability of the pronouns, passing at times some half-ironic remark about their use in language – “But enough of this cursed first person [...]. But what then is the subject? [...] Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it. Matter of habit”,¹³ while dismissing them much more seriously in other circumstances as totally inutilizable and capable only of creating confusion: “it’s the fault of the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

¹² It is indeed admitted, after much hesitation, that “there is I, yes, [...], it’s essential, it’s preferable, [...] so let me hasten to take advantage of being now obliged to say, in a manner of speaking, that there is I”. See *ibid.*, p. 381.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that”.¹⁴

This is however merely one of the manifold paradoxes one encounters when opting to consider the ‘me’ of the ur-quote above, with his “own skin and bones”, in too serious or literal a way. As regards his alleged corporeality, for instance, it is fairly soon manifest that, strictly speaking, a body cannot be said to exist in relation to the ‘protagonist’: he admits indeed more than once that “I don’t feel a mouth on me, I don’t feel the jostle of words in my mouth [...], nor a head, do I feel an ear, frankly now, do I feel an ear, well frankly now I don’t”,¹⁵ lamenting this lack of corporeality as one of the multiple sources of his existential impasse: “if only I could feel something on me, it would be a starting-point, a starting-point”.¹⁶ Whenever the protagonist feels obliged to hypothesize the existence of a body for himself, moreover, or each time he is presented with some “ostensibly independent testimony in support of [his] historical existence”,¹⁷ the prospect sounds – to the reader as well as to the himself – as totally unsatisfactory and unconvincing:

“Evoke at painful junctures, when discouragement threatens to raise its head, the image of a vast cretinous mouth, red, blubber and slobbering, in solitary confinement, [...] the words that obstruct it. [...] Better, ascribe to me a body. Better still, arrogate to me a mind. [...] Take advantage of the brand-new soul and substantiality to abandon, with the only possible abandon, deep down within. And finally, these and other decisions having been taken, carry on as cheerfully as before”.¹⁸

Having thus established the unsustainability of a material body, the protagonist is soon denied even the comfort of a possible coincidence with

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 375-376.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 397-398.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

the acoustic ethereality of the voice itself, which could have been his next logical resort. A separation is indeed assessed between the subjectivity in question and the voice:

“Let me now sum up [...]. There is I, on the one hand, and this noise on the other [...], [and] with regard to the noise, [...] it has not been possible up to date to determine with certainty, or even approximately, what it is, in the way of noise, or how it comes to me, or by what organ it is emitted, or by what perceived, or by what intelligence apprehended, in its main drift.”¹⁹

This voice then, the sole instrument this anti-protagonist can dispose of in this search for his own identity, is somehow always external to him: it does not ultimately belong to him, it exists separately from his subjectivity; it is an acoustic manifestation somehow suffered passively by the subject, who cannot control it and cannot say with any degree of propriety to own it or to be its cause or place of origin:

“This voice that speaks, knowing that it lies [...]. It issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine, I can’t stop it, I can’t prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me. It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, with this voice that is not mine.”²⁰

Having thus realised to be lacking of a body, and being likewise unable to identify with the seemingly omnipresent voice that haunts him, the protagonist reaches some sort of compromise by postulating for himself, in one of the most crucial passages of the entire novel, a liminal position between this voice and the material world:

“Perhaps that’s what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that’s what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 381-382.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either, it's not to me they're talking, it's not of me they're talking."²¹

This idea of in-betweenness, incidentally, of a limbic state or a liminal nature to the protagonist's situation as regards identity, materiality and sense of place, will establish itself as the pivotal leitmotif of the novel, and would appear to remain, as will be seen, the best possible key to the interpretation of *The Unnamable*.

The frail and evanescent nature of his own sense of identity and corporeality, to continue with the list of ailments this untenable 'me' is seen to suffer from, makes this anti-protagonist an easy subject to the manipulations of a whole series of hologrammatic figures of equally uncertain tangibility who would appear to be preying on this heap of inert narrative material in a constant attempt to make a disposable character out of it.²² Their words, more crucially, or better the intentions of these "devils that beset [him]"²³ resound in the very stream of discourse possessing this disembodied protagonist, so that more than a lack of identity it is sometimes an utter confusion of personae what really troubles him. He affirms for instance at one such juncture:

"It's entirely a matter of voices [...]. They've blown me up with their voices, like a balloon, and even as I collapse it's them I hear. [...] I am walled round with their vociferations, none will ever know what I am, none will ever hear me say it, I won't say it, I can't say it, I have no language but theirs. [...] I can't even bring myself to name

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

²² The protagonist laments indeed at one point of being "tired of being matter, matter, pawed and pummelled endlessly in vain [...] They don't know what they want to do with me, they don't know where I am, or what I'm like, I'm like dust, they want to make a man out of dust". See *ibid.*, p. 341.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

them, nor any of the others whose very names I forget, who told me I was they, who I must have tried to be, under duress, or through fear, or to avoid acknowledging me.”²⁴

Or again, on another occasion which sees the protagonist warding off the umpteenth identity these devils have been attempting to impose on him:

“Listen to them, losing heart! That’s to lull me, till I imagine I hear myself saying, myself at last, to myself at last, that it can’t be they, speaking thus, that it can only be I, speaking thus. Oh if I could only find a voice of my own, in all this bubble, it would be the end of their troubles, and of mine.”²⁵

Ultimately, however, no matter how hard these figures try to impose an identity on him, be it that of Mahood, or of Worm, or whatever, it is the protagonist “inaptitude to assume any”²⁶ which always prevails – as happens with Mahood, for instance: “The stories of Mahood are ended. He has realized they could not be about me, he has abandoned, it is I who win, who tried so hard to lose, in order to please him, and be left in peace”,²⁷ and this refrain could be applied in connection with all the other pseudo-characters who have in turn their try and inevitably fail to be this ‘me’, the ‘I’ of the narration.

Owing to this lack of identity, this inability to assume any, the protagonist is thus led at some crucial junctures into pondering the possibility that he could be the sole responsible for the situation he is in, that he could be in fact utterly alone in the dimension he inhabits – “Now there is no one left. [...] It’s I who am doing this to me, I who am talking to me about me”.²⁸ In other words, that the voice that drives him could

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 319-320.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 341-342.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

coincide with that of the external authority behind the whole textual dimension: the author himself, speaking directly through his character.

A few pivotal passages would seem indeed, at least at first sight, to corroborate this supposition, as for instance the one chosen by Johnson as epigraph to *Albert Angelo*, plus other similar ones in which the voice seems to come really close to that of Beckett himself, commenting on his past practices and his apparent decision to dispense from his textual lieutenants, these “sufferers of my pains”,²⁹ in favour of his true self. We have however already widely discussed about the difficulties and contradictions one encounters when trying to assign a definitive and fixed identity, let alone a materiality, to the ‘I’ of the narration in *The Unnamable*; any interpretation, moreover, is further complicated by the very nature of this text, which proceeds programmatically by constant retractations and antitheses, thus causing any single apparent resolution reached at one isolated juncture to be fated, in the long or short run, to be discarded in favour of its opposite, in a spiral that is never really solved.

As if this were not enough to discourage any reader from postulating any facile coincidence of narrating and authorial voice, moreover, there are a number of crucial passages in which this relationship with the ultimate textual authority is explored, and this authority found to be irreconcilable with the narrative dimension, ever excluded from it, irremediably alien and always ultimately a step further from the furthest reachable point. Let us now retrace the main stages of the exploration of this relationship.

The first instance in which the voice refers to the possible existence of one such figure of authority occurs almost in passing, seemingly without giving the issue much thought: “I have spoken for my master, listened for the words of my master never spoken [...]. My master. There is a vein I

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

must not lose sight of”.³⁰ Subsequently, as the narration draws on, this “vein” acquires an increasing importance, as the protagonist goes on attempting to understand who this master might be and what exactly it is he wants from him – “might it not rather be the praise of my master, intoned, in order to obtain his forgiveness?”–,³¹ lamenting on the occasion about the total lack of instructions as to the task he is expected to fulfill in order to be set free – “A little more explicitness on his part, since the initiative belongs to him, might be a help, as well from his point of view as from the one he attributes to me. Let the man explain himself and have done with it”.³²

At this stage, this authority is apparently still sought within the limits of the dimension inhabited by the protagonist, and spoken of as someone tangibly present, however distant and unapproachable in varying degrees. At some juncture, for instance, it is assumed that this master is waiting somewhere for a messenger to report the protagonist’s words so that he could properly assess them – “the words that behoved to say, [...] they have to be ratified by the proper authority, that takes time, he’s far from here”,³³ elsewhere his figure is even observed to overlap partially with those of the protagonist’s tormentors, when the narrator imputes for instance the actions of this evil multitude to an alleged single entity: “My purveyors are more than one, four or five. But it’s more likely the same foul brute all the time, amusing himself pretending to be a many, varying his register, his tone, his accent and his drivel”.³⁴ The observation, however, that for such ubiquitous presence the figure of a sort of God would be needed – for “God alone can fill the rose of the winds, without

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

moving from his place”³⁵ – causes much trouble to the narrator, casting further obscurity on the nature of this sought-for authority. Delving deeper into the mystery of this alleged master’s identity could indeed lead to dangerous outcomes – “The master in any case, we don’t intend, [...] unless absolutely driven to it, to make the mistake of enquiring into him, he’d turn out to be a mere high official, we’d end up needing God, we have lost all sense of decency admittedly”³⁶ –, and the more indeed one attempts to get closer to this ineffable figure, the more this is perceived to shrink away from the narrative space, keeping always out of reach – “Is one to postulate a tertius gaudens? [...] I could employ fifty wretches for this sinister operation and still be short of a fifty-first, to close the circuit”³⁷.

The responsible, in short, it is made progressively more apparent as the narrator goes on enquiring with his machinations, is found to be incompatible with the dimension in which the voice resounds: this voice is ever less likely to coincide with his, and a passage such as: “the everlasting third party, he’s the one to blame, for this state of affairs, the master’s not to blame, neither are they, neither am I, least of all I, we were foolish to accuse one another”³⁸ would seem moreover to draw a definite line between an inside to this narrated world, whose inhabitants are all equal victims of the same situation, and an outside, where the real responsible for this state of affairs resides, irremediably banished from this dimension.

Working from this pivotal recognition of mutual incompatibility – the impossibility, that is, for the external author to be present in his text otherwise than as a textual projection, and for his characters to participate in his material reality –, *The Unnamable* cannot but revel in the impossible

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.350.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p 369.

exploration of this irretrievable distance, this unsolvable difference between the dimension of the narrated world and that of the material reality of the author:

“He seeks me I don’t know why, he calls me, he wants me to come out, he thinks I can come out, he wants me to be he, or another, let us be fair, he wants me to rise up, up into him, or up into another, let us be impartial, he thinks he’s caught me, he feels me in him, then he says I, as if I were he, or in another, let us be just, then he says Murphy, or Molloy, I forget, as if I were Malone, but their day is done, he wants none but himself, for me, he thinks it’s his last chance, he thinks that, they taught him thinking, it’s always he who speaks, Mercier never spoke, Moran never spoke, I never spoke, I seem to speak, that’s because he says I as if he were I, I nearly believed him, do you hear him, as if he were I, I who am far, who can’t move, can’t be found, but neither can he, he can only talk, if that much.”³⁹

And the search is of course mutual, dramatizing the impossibility of any reconciliation on both parts:

“He’s the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, the one to speak, but he can’t speak, then I could stop, I’d be he, I’d be the silence, I’d be back in the silence, we’d be reunited, his story the story to be told, but he has no story, he hasn’t been in story, it’s not certain, he’s in his own story, unimaginable, unspeakable, that doesn’t matter, the attempt must be made, in the old story incomprehensibly mine, to find his, it must be there somewhere, it must have been mine, before being his.”⁴⁰

What Beckett really intends to concentrate on in this novel would appear then to be not much the possibility for the author to speak directly with his own voice in his text, but rather to explore this unsolvable distance between author and textual world, giving new emphasis to an interstitial space that does not even coincide with the narrated world properly. *The Unnamable*’s anti-protagonist is after all not a character: he fails constantly and strenuously to be one, he declares to be the “partition” between these two dimensions, the vibrating “tympanum” traversed by a voice in search

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 396-397.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

of its own place, going back and forth in an undetectable direction, with the space of the page as the common ground on which all these contradictory and antithetical forces leave the trace of their passage in the only form here possible – an immaterial, exclusively verbal one:

“I’m in words, made of words, others’ words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me, I’m the air, the walls, the walled-in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I’m all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go towards me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray, I’m all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say.”⁴¹

The text, consequently, ends on the verge of its own beginning, with the narrator feeling himself eventually to be “before the door that opens on [his] story”,⁴² a door that he will never have occasion to traverse, so that he is left on neither one side nor the other, in the only place where he could ever possibly belong.

3. *Disintegrations: The Case of “Albert Angelo” and Johnson’s Individual Appropriation of Beckett*

After such lengthy analysis of the situation of *The Unnamable*, necessary for a thorough comprehension of the wider and more articulated context from which the epigraph for *Albert Angelo* has been isolated, it is now possible to shift the discourse to the peculiarities of Johnson’s text, which in light of the above discussion – and despite the affinities seemingly suggested by the author – would appear to differ considerably, in its

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 379-380.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 407.

intentions and premises, from what Beckett has attempted to achieve with his own novel.

Albert Angelo, as already briefly mentioned, is chiefly about an architect *manqué* who is forced by circumstances to earn his living as a supply teacher, filling in vacancies in various London schools and managing one difficult class after another. Using a kaleidoscopic *Ulysses*-like technique and an impressive variety of technical and narrative devices, Johnson nevertheless creates and sustains, for a good 163 pages, the illusion of an autonomous identity for the protagonist, the namesake Albert Albert – whose own “Albertness” is thus ironically emphasized –,⁴³ until such illusion is abruptly and violently broken, towards the very end of the novel, by an open intrusion of the external author into the textual discourse, to the frustrated cry of “OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!”⁴⁴

Following such unexpected intrusion, a new section named “Disintegration” opens, in which a first heartfelt, breathless explanation is rashly thrown in – or up? – for the reader to digest:

“Fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero though what a useless appellation my first character then im trying to say something about me through him albert an architect when whats the point in covering up covering up covering over pretending pretending i can say anything through him that is anything I would be interested in saying.”⁴⁵

The whole edifice of the novel is thus made to collapse, for the author clearly feels now the urgent need to enter with the “enormous

⁴³ “Albert Albert, to emphasize his Albertness, hisness, itness, uniqueness”. See B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo*, cit., p. 169.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167. I am here retaining the original form of the text, with its lack of punctuation or upper-case characters, which is all part of the author’s intention to convey the urgency and immediacy of the discourse in this passage.

totality”⁴⁶ of himself into his own novel, not as a fictional projection, not as a textual reflection of himself, but as the true unmediated B. S. Johnson in his own real “skin and bones”, and with the very material surroundings from which he is physically writing, namely his working desk in 34 Claremont Square, London N1, Johnson’s actual address at the time:

“I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality about sitting here writing looking out across Claremont Square trying to say something about the writing.”⁴⁷

This urgent need for truth and immediacy thus obviously clashes with fabulation – for “if I start falsifying in telling stories then I move away from the truth of my truth which is not good”⁴⁸ – and likewise with the use of a textual lieutenant to take the author’s place in what should be his own story. And the author, being a poet, cannot possibly be replaced by the figure of an architect *manqué*, which is doubly distant from the truth he feels compelled to convey:

“Look, I’m trying to tell you something of what I feel about being a poet in a world where only poets care anything real about poetry, through the objective correlative of an architect who has to earn his living as a teacher. this device you cannot have failed to see creaking, ill-fitting in many places, for architects *manqués* can earn livings very nearly connected with their art, and no poet has ever lived by his poetry, and architecture has a functional aspect quite lacking in poetry, and, simply, architecture is just not poetry.”⁴⁹

There is thus frustration, on the one hand, about the growing awareness of the inadequacy of such objective correlative to convey the existential agony of the writer, and a sense of failure almost amounting to

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*

sinful guilt on the other, for having resorted to falsification in trying to give a true account of oneself and one's own experience; all this has accumulated throughout the narration until the point in which the tension created has become simply too much to withhold. The whole project of the novel as it stood has failed: it has to be called off, dismantled. And as a logical, though perhaps rather extreme consequence of this, and in accordance with his absolute need for truth, the author then sets about dismantling almost point-by-point the various accidents of the plot as they have been previously presented, exposing in detail every manipulation each episode of his real life, each person's name or toponym, has undergone in the process of being worked into the narration, with the author scarcely holding himself from the urgency to list every single instance of his "lying": "I could go on and on, through each page, page after page, pointing out the lies, the lies, but it would be so tedious, so tedious".⁵⁰

And finally, after a concluding brief coda – for "even I [...] would not leave such a mess, [...] so many loose ends"⁵¹ –, in which the no-more-servable character of Albert is dispensed with by a somewhat forcible and absurd death,⁵² the novel ends leaving almost a sense of *coitus interruptus* – at least if one were to take plot and characterisation as a novel's *raison d'être*, and one certainly is not, with an author such as B.S. Johnson; besides, what a mightier ejaculation is one expected to find, in *Albert*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁵² A comical death "à la Murphy", Johnson annotates in this respect in his working papers for *Albert Angelo* (see *Albert Angelo Working Papers*, B. S. Johnson Archive, London, British Library, Archives and Manuscripts). Readers will perhaps remember that in Beckett's novel the namesake protagonist Murphy was made to die of a gas leak, and his ashes scattered on a pub's pavement among "the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit" (S. Beckett, *Murphy*, London, Picador, 1973, p. 154).

Angelo or anywhere else, than the “FUCK ALL THIS LYING!” of its almighty aposiopesis?

This is then what happens in *Albert Angelo*, the alleged result of Johnson’s reworking of Beckett’s ideas as expressed in the passage from *The Unnamable*. But what position, it is now apt to enquire, do the texts of Johnson and Beckett really occupy with respect to one another as regards the issue of the textual presence of the author? In the light of the above analysis of *The Unnamable* and *Albert Angelo*, and despite the direct lineage Johnson would seem to establish by employing an epigraph taken from Beckett’s novel, one feels nevertheless obliged to observe that the operations brought forward by the two authors appear significantly to be pointing to two rather different, if not thoroughly opposite directions.

On the one hand, as has been seen, Beckett is exploring the relationship between author and text in all its paradoxical ambivalence and within a logocentric frame of reference: the textual dimension is treated in his writing as an effervescent liminal space equally alien to the material world of the author and to the fixity of the fictional dimension of the work of literature in its traditional form; a space, nonetheless, in which these two dimensions mysteriously meet and reflect one another, seek contact with one another and long for a correspondence that can never be feasible. This because the ‘lying’ is for Beckett implicit in the telling itself, not imputable to the teller, nor necessarily in the telling of stories rather than verifiable facts: it is a lying that has a linguistic origin, to be traced back to the impossibility of language to reflect reality and of words to denote things in the real world.⁵³ The ‘I’ suffers the same destiny, in that the identity of the

⁵³ One might perhaps think of the episode of Mr. Knott’s pots in the novel *Watt* as the passage best illustrating this linguistic predicament, which is however omnipresent in Beckett’s writing. See Id., *Watt*, London, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 67-68.

speaker, by recurring to and masking itself behind the elusive materiality of the pronoun,⁵⁴ is lost in an ocean of likewise empty words a-floating, a “dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing”.⁵⁵ The author is thus ultimately, in Beckett’s view, always necessarily excluded from the world of his own creation, because in the very moment he attempts to convey any form of truth about himself by resorting to the pronoun ‘I’, or to language in general, he has already irremediably distanced himself from the truth he wished to convey; the textual world is indeed a dimension consisting exclusively of discourse, of words that once distanced from the utterer and consigned to the page become something quite different, something other, living a life – or dying a death – of their own.

Johnson’s ‘I’ – and the operation it stands for – is instead something of a completely different nature. Reasoning from a standpoint antithetical to that of Beckett, Johnson aims at reasserting the historical contingency and the ontological reality of this ‘I’, as well as that of the material surroundings from which this ‘I’ is speaking. As Philipp Tew indeed maintains, “Johnson recognizes what a critical language of authenticity divorced from context suppresses. [...] The texture of the writing and its speculative method remind the reader that the ‘I’ or self cannot be formal and is linked to the objectivity of history and the world”.⁵⁶ This ‘I’, in other words, is still capable for Johnson to denote the identity it stands for, to personify it: it *is*, in a sense, B.S. Johnson himself in his own “skin and bones”, in a coincidence with the implied speaker that the I of *The*

⁵⁴ The disastrous consequences of the use of ‘I’ to denote a single, unitary identity through time lies for example at the base of Krapp’s situation in *Krapp’s Last Tape*.

⁵⁵ S. Beckett, *The Unnamable*, cit., p. 380.

⁵⁶ P. Tew, *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001, pp. 100-101.

Unnamable could never possibly hope to achieve. What Johnson then proposes, with his own active and all-inclusive intrusion into the textual world, is the virtual elision of any form of definite separation between the material and the narrated dimension: the very partition for which Beckett's anti-character stands for is thus in Johnson's approach bypassed, if not directly dismantled, in a unifying and unmediated vision of art and life as part of a same continuum. "Inscribed in his thinking", comments indeed Tew in this connection, "is the potential offered by a period before almost everything intellectual was made textual and logocentric, with a conviction in his texts that Johnson speaks directly to and of experience",⁵⁷ and Johnson's own peculiar view of the novel, his various pronouncements on how they should be written and what kind of mission they should accomplish, all express this urgent need for absolute faithfulness to experience and immediacy of communication, in a conviction that the novel can and must be employed as an instrument of truth:

"I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels. [...] The two terms *novel* and *fiction* are not, incidentally, synonymous, as many seem to suppose in the way they use them interchangeably. [...] The novel is a form in the same sense that the sonnet is a form; within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel."⁵⁸

Appreciated in this light, Johnson's and Beckett's respective views appear thus to be rather difficult to conciliate, at least with regard to the narrow context of these two novels under examination. And if one were to explore the consequences of such divergent stances as they have been developed in these two authors' subsequent oeuvre, one would probably

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xii-xiii.

⁵⁸ B. S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, in *Id.*, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson*, edited by J. Coe, P. Tew and J. Jordan, London, Picador, 2013, p. 14.

conclude that their differences in this respect have been confirmed, if not perhaps even widened, across the years, as Johnson and Beckett have attempted, with each successive novel, to test such consequences to further and further extremes, or pushing them towards ever new directions.

On the one hand Beckett, in works such as *Texts for Nothing*, *How it Is* and the later short prose, has indeed explored more and more closely and obsessively this interstitial space separating the author from the textual world, insisting on the irreconcilability of the material and the verbal and aiming implacably towards a literature of silence and non-perception – as Beckett himself has indeed famously declared: “Is there any reason why the terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved, so that through whole passages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence?”⁵⁹ Johnson, on the other hand, has instead given great emphasis on presence and materiality in his own literature, embracing a form in which the transparent and unmediated presence of the author has to be regarded as the *conditio sine qua non* of the narration – “I really discovered what I should be doing with *Albert Angelo* (1964) where I broke through the English disease of the objective correlative to speak truth directly if solipsistically in the novel form, and heard my own small voice”⁶⁰ – and in which constant references are made to a tangible, verifiable reality outside the text, from which the text stems and towards which it is always inevitably addressed: “There exists an insistence”, again in Tew’s terms, “that something objective [...] extends the dialogue between the self and

⁵⁹ S. Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by R. Cohn, New York, Grove Press, 1984, pp. 52-53 (letter to A. Kaun).

⁶⁰ B. S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, cit., p. 22.

the other in the nature of the communicative act of which narrative forms a part”.⁶¹

Johnson’s exploration of the possibilities of the author’s presence in his text, to be more precise, has in fact led him to proceed along two somewhat different paths, two modalities which could appear at times – at least superficially – to be almost antithetical to one another. One of these directions, the most logical and direct consequence of *Albert Angelo’s* “Disintegration” section, is represented by such novels as *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates*, in which Johnson claims, this time transparently and from the very beginning, to be the physical individual standing behind the textual world as well as the one speaking from inside of it – and not, strictly speaking, as a character.⁶² The idea is thus espoused, in such cases, of the possibility of a genuine, faithful and direct transposition of one’s biographical experience into literature – and a true novel, after all, is for Johnson only life in a different form.⁶³

In the novels pertaining to the second modality (*House Mother Normal*, *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* and – partially – *See the Old Lady Decently*), Johnson returns instead, rather paradoxically, to the employment of fictional inventions, the same he didn’t hesitate to dismiss

⁶¹ P. Tew, *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, cit., p. 118.

⁶² It is not by chance, for instance, that *Trawl* opens on the tune of “I · · · always with I · · · one starts from · · one and I share the same character”, varying on the same theme in the closing lines: “I, always with I · · · · · one always starts with I · · · · · And ends with I”. See B. S. Johnson, *Trawl*, London, Picador, 2013, p. 7 and p. 183.

⁶³ And this has at times inevitably caused some debate around the status of Johnson’s writing. The author himself relates, for instance, that “The publisher of *Trawl* wished to classify it as autobiography, not as a novel. It is a novel, I insisted and could prove; what it is not is fiction” (see Id., *Aren’t Your Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, cit., p. 14). Frederic Warburg, of Secker & Warburg, had indeed commented on Johnson’s literary practices in these terms: “Novels often described as fiction are usually fiction, but you are horrified at the idea of incorporating what you call ‘lies’ in your novels which tends to make them equivalent to a slightly unusual form of autobiography”. F. Warburg to B.S. Johnson (18 July 1966), in J. Coe, *Like A Fiery Elephant*, cit., p. 216.

as lies in *Albert Angelo* – and it is the author himself who comments on the first two novels of this phase in terms of “a change (again!) of direction, an elbow joint in the arm, still part of the same but perhaps going another way”.⁶⁴ Such practice, however, is nevertheless incorporated within Johnson’s “paradigm of truth”⁶⁵ and his exploration of the possibilities of the author’s direct action on his text, in that the ‘lies’ employed in such novels are always brought back to, and justified by, the tangible figure of the deviser of the story, that is Johnson himself, not just any abstract, irretrievable authorial presence as is the case with Beckett. This is because “If life and narrative are to interconnect [...], the writer must recognize the distinction between appropriately factual (therefore truthful) and distorting (being unrelated to reality) kinds of narrative”.⁶⁶ Johnson-the-author, indeed, never conceals himself to the reader, and often exercises his right – which he has arrogated to himself decisively since the ‘Disintegration’ of *Albert Angelo* – to intrude within the narrated world at any moment. This can however be done in different ways and for varying reasons, at times for instance to engage in a direct dialogue with his characters, and express through them some formal consideration about the novel or the writing – as in many passages of *Christie Malry*⁶⁷ –, or simply to reassess, on other occasions, the presence of an external author physically writing his story

⁶⁴ B. S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?*, cit., p. 26. Johnson also justifies here his apparent ideological retro-front with the fact that “the ideas for both *House Mother Normal* (1971) and *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973) came to me whilst writing *Travelling People* [his first novel] [...], but the subsequent three personal novels interposed themselves, demanded to be written first” (see *ibid.*). Drawing here an interesting parallel, one could say that the autobiographical urgency that interrupts the storytelling in *Albert Angelo* has had a similar effect on Johnson’s writing corpus as a whole, causing in a way a rupture in the logical succession in which his novels were intended to be written.

⁶⁵ Id., *Albert Angelo*, cit., p. 170.

⁶⁶ P. Tew, *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, cit., p. 91.

⁶⁷ See for instance B. S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, London, Picador, 2001, pp. 165-6 and pp. 178-180.

from precise and tangible surroundings, to remind the reader at once of the artificial nature of the text and of the existence of a historical reality from which the narration itself originates – as in a scene of *See the Old Lady Decently* in which Johnson's daughter is seen intruding in his study, interrupting his writing.⁶⁸

In spite of the actual recourse to fictional elements and textual mediators in some of Johnson's later texts, it is thus evident how the consequences of the "almighty aposiopesis" of *Albert Angelo* have come to define a pivotal aesthetical turning point in the author's production, establishing a crucial precedent against which all his successive work has been measured in one way or another. To return however to the problem of Beckett's epigraph and the role it possibly played in informing this momentous revelation in Johnson's literary development, some doubt remains as to Johnson's awareness of Beckett's message and the interpretation he gives of the incriminated passage, given the profound differences between the two authors' theoretical standpoints and the result they have produced in their respective texts.

On the one hand, Johnson appears at times to give a literal interpretation to such passages of *The Unnamable* in which the authorial voice deceptively resounds in the words of the protagonist, as he does for example in occasion of a review of a critical study of Beckett by Hugh Kenner:

"Firstly, in his interpretation and discussion of *The Unnamable* Mr. Kenner does not seem to realise, crucially, that it is Beckett himself who, having failed to project himself through various characters, assumes the first person in the latter section of the

⁶⁸ "Where were we? I did actually break off at a full stop above, [...] since that little girl with something of my mother in her face has just brought me a roll baked by her mother, [...] interrupted me where I write in isolation at the top of the house, such sweet interposition!". See Id., *See the Old Lady Decently*, London, Hutchinson, 1975, pp. 27-28.

novel. [...] Thus it is the author himself who directly reaches the impasse of ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’.”⁶⁹

Such an interpretation, naïve and superficial as it is, would seemingly confirm the conviction, on Johnson’s part, of a direct intervention of Beckett in his own text, thus providing a strong reason for claiming an affinity of purpose between *Albert Angelo* and *The Unnamable* – and not by chance Johnson extends here the idea of Beckett’s alleged presence to the entire novel by quoting its conclusion: his voice, Johnson seems here to affirm, is always to be implied behind the words of the narrating voice.

On several other occasions, however, Johnson rather appears to distance himself from Beckett, denoting, if not the awareness of a difference existing between himself and the latter, at least a desire that his work be regarded in a different light from that of his master. In an interview with Christopher Ricks of BBC, for instance, Johnson points out that “I admire Beckett very much, while I don’t imitate him in any sense. I look upon him as a great example of what can be done. I think personally he is in a cul-de-sac”,⁷⁰ a view he had already expressed in a review of Beckett’s *How it Is*, in which he confesses more or less directly a cooling down of his enthusiasm for this new phase of his master’s writing:

“Beckett seems to me to be exploring a cul-de-sac, and while I cannot help admiring both his integrity and his dedication in breaking new ground therein, I deeply regret at the same time that he has abandoned on the way those incidental qualities of language and intellectual exuberance and wit which so magnificently characterise his first two novels, *Murphy* and *Watt*.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ B. S. Johnson, review of H. Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, in “The Spectator”, 23 November 1962, p. 44.

⁷⁰ See P. Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, cit., p. 145.

⁷¹ B. S. Johnson, review of *How It Is*, cit., p. 22.

The ambiguity of Johnson's position on Beckett is then further complicated by some notes he makes in a personal notebook intended originally towards a prospective biography of Beckett.⁷² Here Johnson is seen pondering retrospectively on the crucial role the reading of his master has played in a defining moment of his own writing career, or rather, when the writer lurking inside of him was still at a stage of development: "somewhere it was in *Murphy* [...] that I first saw the word SOLIPSISM, [...] it formed part of a solution for me, hinted at some kind of mode of being = mode of GOING ON for me".⁷³ And Beckett is again involved, later on in the same notebook, in an imaginary dialogue centered on Johnson's solipsistic revelation: "SAY – well, you 'taught' me (introduced me to) Solipsism – so if my tribute to you is of that kind, then you have only yourself to blame".⁷⁴

Such cryptic passages would seem to indicate a perhaps belated awareness, on Johnson's part, of a certain degree of manipulation he might have exerted on Beckett's message to serve his own ends, a deeply personal interpretation of a partial aspect of his writing he has perhaps charged with a subjective meaning not intended in the original – "does all he says seem significant for me in the light of what I know he is, of what I believe him to be?",⁷⁵ wanders indeed Johnson later on in the same pages. It is also possible that Johnson might have interpreted Beckett perhaps too literally or superficially at an initial stage – a contention that would seem to be supported by admissions such as: "Beckett's solipsism/stoicism fitted, I read him with an intensity [...]. Yet the time when I was to study him

⁷² The notebook is entitled "Experiment / Venture into BIOGRAPHY".

⁷³ See Samuel Beckett Notebook (1966-1973), B. S. Johnson Archive, London, British Library, Archives and Manuscripts.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁵ *Ibidem.*

really deeply and seriously was yet to come”⁷⁶ –, but that developing his own ideas about the novel and, more crucially, becoming increasingly more conscious that his intentions differed considerably from those of his master, he might have reoriented his early somewhat intuitive interpretation of Beckett in a solipsistic way, bending it towards an altogether different direction.

A curious but significant echo of these dynamics, incidentally, is to be found in the genealogy of the name of Johnson’s protagonist, who was initially to be called Samuel Angelo,⁷⁷ which inevitably recalls both Beckett and Angel, the London district in which Johnson was living at the time,⁷⁸ thus giving possibly the idea of a sort of Beckettian Londoner, a definition easily applicable to Johnson himself – and Johnson’s own note about killing off his protagonist “comically à la Murphy”,⁷⁹ being Murphy the most London-bound of Beckett’s characters, is a further telling evidence of this link. The name Samuel was eventually dropped in a later revision of the novel, a fact perhaps even more crucial to our discussion, since renouncing the “Samuelness” of his character Johnson betrays a more or less conscious desire to place some distance between himself and

⁷⁶ See Samuel Beckett Notebook (1966-1973), in *Notebooks, Diaries and Proposals (1949-1973)*, B. S. Johnson Archive, London, British Library, Archives and Manuscripts. This passage relates to a personally difficult time for Johnson, corresponding to his breaking up with his former fiancée in 1958, an episode that informs crucially more than one Johnsonian novel and is central to the narration of *Albert Angelo* itself.

⁷⁷ It is however known, from various personal notes and correspondence, that the very first version of the protagonist’s name was Henry Angelo, which would have marked a stronger continuity with Johnson’s previous novel *Travelling People*, whose main character was named indeed Henry Henry.

⁷⁸ Johnson specifies indeed, in a note found among his working papers for *Albert Angelo*, that the final breaking off must occur “after a bit in which S sits at window looking at architecture, doing architectural drawings in which what he sees (=life around Angel) interferes with his own creation or architectural originalities”. See *Albert Angelo Working Papers*, in *Working Papers and Drafts for Novels by B. S. Johnson (1960-1975)*, B. S. Johnson Archive, London, British Library, Archive and Manuscripts.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

Beckett, as indeed he admits in a letter to his friend Zulfikar Ghose, in which he also explains how this move will allow him to use the quotation from *The Unnamable* in a way that will hopefully not encourage too strong or quick an identification with Beckett: “It’s not SA any longer but AA = Albert Angelo because I wanted a quotation from Sam at the beginning and it would look as though I was writing about Beckett, or might do so”.⁸⁰

To say that Johnson was writing “about” Beckett would be “crassly to miss the point” of *Albert Angelo*, for sure; it is nonetheless evident, however, that the figure of Samuel Beckett and the influence of his writing has always been present, obsessively and problematically, in some prominent corner of Johnson’s mind, during the composition of this novel as well as in many other stages of his development as a writer.⁸¹

4. Conclusion

It is thus perhaps not possible, as has been hopefully demonstrated, to assert the exact degree of consciousness and profoundness of understanding with which Johnson incorporates Beckett’s epigraph from *The Unnamable*, as well as establish the precise way in which such incorporation is to be interpreted, or by what kind of light such passage is meant to illumine the reading and reception of *Albert Angelo*, if that was

⁸⁰ B. S. Johnson, letter to Z. Ghose (30 July 1963), in *The B.S. Johnson – Zulfikar Ghose Correspondence*, edited by V. Guignery, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars, 2015, p. 204.

⁸¹ In a reply to a young Johnson, his friend Frank Lissauer had indeed prophetically commented: “Since you dare not laugh at the things Beckett laughs at, for fear of plagiarism, you’ll have quite a job” (F. Lissauer, letter to B.S. Johnson, 15 January 1959, in *General Correspondence (1957-1973)*, B. S. Johnson Archive, London, British Library, Archives and Manuscripts. We have no access to Johnson’s original letter, but this passage can be regarded as sufficient evidence of Johnson’s preoccupation, from early on in his career, of being too closely affiliated with the work of his master.

ever among Johnson's plans. What is sure, in any case, is that interpreting the link between these two texts in too transparent or literal a way can be utterly misleading and detrimental to the understanding of Johnson as a unique and original voice quite distinct from that of the master he nonetheless owes so much to.

For Beckett's *The Unnamable* is indeed an extremely complex and ambiguous text, one whose paradoxical, antithetical way of progressing "by affirmations and negations invalidated as soon as uttered" makes it impossible to isolate a single passage that could be made to explain and encapsulate all the issues it addresses. And Johnson has indeed certainly "only himself to blame", for the rather partial and extremely personal interpretation he appears to give of Beckett's text, and for basing such momentous turn in his writerly practice on such a reworked, solipsistically reoriented reading. It is not a matter of blame, however, nor certainly a pity, if by doing so Johnson, instead of following blindly into Beckett's steps and becoming an empty imitator of his master, has taken – consciously or unconsciously – an altogether different direction, one that has brought him to create a body of work of striking originality, producing a vision of the novel that challenges the very separation between art and life which Beckett explores to such obsessive extremities in a work so different in scope, tone and nature: "Johnson", concludes indeed Tew, "utilizes the aesthetic example of Beckett almost as his launch-pad to other realms. Again, he is neither slavishly nor narrowly imitative, making literary allusions to register a fond recognition of source and influence of an alternative project".⁸²

The history of the novel, in a way, has thus perhaps only to thank Johnson for substituting – again, apparently – Samuel Beckett for the

⁸² P. Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, cit., p. 146.

kaleidoscopic 'me' of the narrating voice of *The Unnamable*, whereas otherwise we would only have a redundant repetition of ideas already past their exhaustion.

Copyright © 2023

Parole rubate. Rivista internazionale di studi sulla citazione /
Purloined Letters. An International Journal of Quotation Studies