

**“Thought words Words inane Thought inane”:  
Samuel Beckett’s Critique of Language in his  
Four *Novellas***

**María José Carrera de la Red**

*Universidad de Valladolid*

**Abstract**

This essay explores how Samuel Beckett’s four postwar *novellas* express in narratological terms what the Austrian positivist Fritz Mauthner’s *Critique of Language* (published at the turn of the twentieth century) expresses in philosophical terms: a profound skepticism as regards the ability of language to convey concepts, emotions or information. We analyse three points of coincidence between the thought of the philosopher and the writer’s.

**1. Beckett’s Mauthner notes**

Despite Beckett’s well-documented attempts to put scholars off the track as to the role Fritz Mauthner might have played in his aesthetics (Ben-Zvi, 1983: 66; Garforth, 2004: 54), the quantity and quality of the notes that he took from his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (1901-1903) —eleven long entries in the *Whoroscope* Notebook, kept at Reading University (RUL MS 3000), and four typed folios housed in Trinity College Dublin (MS 10971/5)— testify that he read the *Critique* with interest, if only that. The fact that Beckett kept a copy of Mauthner’s work in his personal library in his later years shows that this was a lifelong interest.

The dating of Beckett’s Mauthner notes has been the subject of much controversy, but the recent publication of Matthew Feldman’s *Beckett’s Books* seems to have settled the issue: Beckett first read Mauthner in 1938, between the writing of *Murphy* and *Watt* (Feldman, 2006: 131). This must have proved disappointing for those eager to see the Austrian’s influence in Beckett’s “German Letter of 1937”, where he gave expression to his growing dissatisfaction with his own language in terms that Mauthner himself would have employed (Beckett, 1983:

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51-54, 170-173). As it seems, Mauthner's *Critique* would simply have reinforced a view that was already developing in Beckett: that the task of the artist was —to paraphrase his words in the German Letter— to tear apart the veil of language in order to get at the (No)thing(ness) behind it; in order, that is, to reach the silence that underlies All (*ibid.*).

### 2. Mauthner's *Critique of Language*

This necessary destruction of language by means of language itself, in order to reach silence, is finally what Mauthner's theory of language is about. There is no easy way to translate the complexities of Mauthner's thought in a few lines, as we must do here, but Beckett's own choice of quotations as transcribed and translated by Julian Garforth (2004: 57-62) can be our guide through the maze. Mauthner's *Critique* holds that both external reality and inner life cannot be known through language because there is no one-to-one relationship between words and things. For him, words are only metaphors based on the memory of past sensory experiences; since everybody has different memories, the unsuitability of words for communication ensues. Thoughts and words are synonymous, but there can be no thinking without words; since words lack substance, our thoughts are equally inane and empty. The highest degree of critical attitude, Mauthner concludes, is silence. Aware of the absurdity of using words to explore the silence, he admits to being caught in their net, and compares the ascent in the critique of language with the climbing of a ladder whose rungs he must destroy by stepping upon it. It takes him almost two thousand pages (full of words) to reach this conclusion.

In a letter of 1979, Beckett sums up his initial response to all this with his characteristic minimalist style:

For me it all came down to:  
Thought words  
Words inane  
Thought inane  
Such was my levity. (Ben-Zvi, 1983: 66)

### 3. Beckett's critique of language in the *Novellas*

The inevitable failure of trying to know truth through language is clearly what Beckett's 1945 novel *Watt* is about. But the definite 'assault against words' that he sees as a prerequisite to express that failure, will have to wait until the aftermath of the World War, when Beckett abandons his native language as an expressive medium and produces his first creative texts in French. The real breakthrough takes place when he writes a horizontal line across the notebook page in which he was writing a short story in English, only to continue it in French. Eventually published as *La Fin*, this story signals—together with three others that he writes in 1946—a distinctively new way of writing on Beckett's part. It is from their English translations that we will be quoting here (*The End*, *The Expelled*, *First Love* and *The Calmative*)—for translated they were by the author once he had found a way of 'tearing apart the veil' of his own language.

Space restrictions have forced us to focus on just three points of coincidence between Mauthner's thought and the predicament of Beckett's nameless protagonists. These four, when expelled from their usual abode, begin a quest for an alternative refuge. While unrelentingly recollecting past events and commenting on their own narration, they embody Mauthner's ideas that there is no thinking outside speaking, that the ego does not exist outside language, and that communication between men is impossible.

#### 3.1. *There is no thinking outside speaking*

"We can only think what language permits us, what language and its individual usage allow us to think. [...] I have said what language allowed me to say" (Garforth, 2004: 60). Beckett's characters' predicament makes good this equation between words and thought and the confusion that ensues, an equation that lies at the heart of Mauthner's *Critique*. Witness the words of the first-person narrator of *First Love* at the outset of his story: "I associate, rightly or wrongly, my marriage with the death of my father, in time. That other links exist, on other levels, between these two affairs, is not impossible. I have enough trouble as it is in trying *to say what I think I know*" (Beckett, 1995: 25; my

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italics). Trouble which, by the way, does not prevent him from going on and on in what ends up being the longest of the four stories; a chain of words which often he himself does not understand. He can be either excited, as when he finds the perfect shelter and exclaims: “Try and put me out now”, only to add “I seemed not to grasp the meaning of these words [...] till some seconds after having uttered them” (41); or reflective, as when he muses “I wonder what that means” (35), *that* being the words he has just emitted. Words do not bring Beckett’s characters any closer to knowledge.

This is Beckett’s new postwar aesthetics, where words become signs not of knowledge but of the failure of knowledge. “I have always spoken [...] of things that never existed, or that existed if you insist [...] but not with the existence I ascribe to them” (*ibid.*) —words by the *First Love* narrator that will still resonate when Beckett comes to write *The Unnamable*.

“All thought takes place in the words of language and thought only resolves itself when the nebulous nature of words has become clear to us” (Garforth, 2004: 57) —thus reads one of Beckett’s manuscript notes from Mauthner. This ‘nebulous nature of words’ is all too present in the doubt-filled lives of these four protagonists, and will always be, if we trust the narrator of *The Expelled* who has spent a good long page and a half explaining the motives for his bizarre gait, only to reflect on his own justifications as follows: “[W]e may reason on to our heart’s content, the fog won’t lift” (Beckett, 1995: 51). This cryptic aphorism of sorts could well have its origin in the above-mentioned Mauthner quote —Beckett permitting.

### 3.2. *The ego does not exist outside language*

In these short texts, the *I* enters Beckett’s fiction never quite to leave it. One of the signature stylistic innovations of Beckett’s postwar prose, these *novellas*’ peculiar first-person narrative voice provides us with one of the clearest instances of convergence between the thought of the Austrian philosopher and the practice of the Irish writer.

The *I*, for Mauthner, is contingent, a myth that does not exist outside language. An empirist, Mauthner states that we are aware of our *ego* because we feel ourselves at the centre of vision and hearing perceptions that clamour for our attention; but these are only

impressions that need memory to confirm that they also happened in the past and which are converted by the mind into words. As one of Beckett's Mauthner notes reads, "Both experience and thought are only memory or language, the one viewed from the front, the other from the back" (Garforth, 2004: 61).

Beckett's protagonists struggle to reconstruct elusive past events, most of which end up being as elusive as the idea of *I*. The ego's lack of consistency —its being formed by a series of individual memories without a link of continuity between them— is manifest in the anxious words of the narrator of *The Calmative*: "But it's to me this evening something has to happen, to my body as in myth and metamorphosis, this old body to which nothing ever happened, or so little" (Beckett, 1995: 63). What he does next is recollect a recurrent past scene, clearly aimed at strengthening the sense of *I* that eludes him.

In these words from *The End*, "the next thing I was having visions, I who never did, except sometimes in my sleep, who never had, real visions, I'd remember, except perhaps as a child, my myth will have it so" (98), the *I* that has visions now does not agree with the *I* who only had them as a child —according to the only myth of the character's *I* that the narrator is aware of. Confusing, for us readers as much as for them speakers.

Snatches of childhood memories are, then, invoked to try to rebuild the *I*, but the participation of external witnesses that confirm these protagonists' existence is also valued, and momentarily solves their inability to recall past moments. Hence the anxiety of these characters to contact others, which is particularly true of the anguished narrator of *The Calmative*. He sits alone in a quiet harbour and waits for something to happen, while he envisions a very different scene full of hustle and bustle where the dreamed-of contact could be reached: "it would be a sad state of affairs if in that unscandalizable throng I couldn't achieve a little encounter that would calm me a little, or exchange a few words with a navigator for example, words to carry away with me to my refuge, to add to my collection" (65). May this serve as an illustration of the many other attempts on the part of the protagonist of this story to substantiate that there is an *I* that others can confirm.

The narrator of *The End*, for his part, is about to give up; no one comes any more to take care of his needs, which means that no

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one comes any more to confirm the external *I* to the internal *I* on which he concentrates:

That no one came any more, that no one could come any more to ask me if I was all right and needed nothing, distressed me then but little. [...] To know I had a being, however faint and false, outside of me, had once had the power to stir my heart. You become unsociable, it's inevitable. [...] Even the words desert you, it's as bad as that. (97)

“A being, however faint and false, outside of me” that could confirm that the *I* that I talk about is the same *I* that I feel —the narrator-protagonist no longer yearns for that, and is about to become speechless; and without speech there is no *I*, as we well know from Mauthner.

### *3.3. Communication between men is impossible*

What happens when contact with others is made? Given Mauthner's premise that language results from individual experience, from individual memories of past experiences, is it possible for two people to understand words in the same way? The Austrian's answer is 'certainly not': even if men think that they are communicating, they are simply taking part in a convention, unaware of the limitations of the instrument they use. But only the fools who understand and want to be understood suffer on account of those limitations, says the philosopher.

In Beckett's postwar *novellas* we find fools like those. If they talk incessantly about the most trivial things—a bench, a heap of dung, a hat, a coat, a plant, the weather—this is so as not to fall into the silence that results from the impossibility of knowing. “To think that in a moment all will be said” (75), says the frightened narrator of *The Calmative* when he senses that he cannot go on with his story. In an attempt to keep going, he reviews the encounters he has achieved in his wanderings through the city; “my spoils”, he calls them (*ibid.*), a booty made up of those whose mere presence or conversation momentarily confirm his existence. The common denominator of the scenes that

narrate those encounters is one of complete lack of communication, which is expressed in at least three different ways:

1. In the form of dialogues in which the narrator-protagonist seems the only interlocutor. The speaking *I* of *First Love*, for instance, finds it irritating to talk to the prostitute who is his one ‘encounter’, because she repeats his very words and takes over some of his favourite expressions: “And the way she kept on saying I don’t know, I can’t. I alone did not know and could not.” (36). But this is before the woman reveals that she has a room for him, at which stage he exclaims, “At last conversation worthy of the name” (39). The human language is valid for practical purposes only, says Mauthner, and indeed at this point the asylum-seeking narrator understands the girl pretty well.

2. In the form of verbal exchanges in which the narrator does not understand, or is not understood by, his interlocutor. The narrator of *The Calmative* is perplexed at one of his *encounter’s* using the same expression in two contexts that even *he* knows are very different: “there you have it all” (73), exclaims the man he’s met, after explaining the mechanisms of sexuality to him, *and* once again after showing him one of the little bottles he carries in his bag. “It can’t have been the same all as before” (74), exclaims a perplexed narrator on hearing the phrase for a second time.

In *The End* we have a clear illustration of Mauthner’s idea that the origin of words lies in personal experiences which cannot be shared with other people. When the angry narrator shouts “Exelmans!”, his interlocutor answers: “Come come, [...] and anyway no one understands a tenth of what you say” (80). No wonder: Exelmans is the name of a French marshal that the average manager of a charitable institution —the man to whom the exclamation is addressed— is not expected to be familiar with; unless, of course, he has read Beckett’s novel *Watt*, written a year earlier, where the name of the military comes up in a list of dactyls that the character Mr Knott likes to enumerate: “Exelmans! Cavendish! Habbakuk! Ecchymose!” (Beckett, 1981: 209). As meaningless in the novel as in the *novella*.

3. Lack of communication often takes the form of complete speechlessness. An example will suffice: “I resolved to speak to him. So I marshalled the words and opened my mouth, thinking I would hear them. But all I heard was a kind of rattle, unintelligible even to me who knew what was intended. But it was nothing, mere speechlessness due

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to long silence” (Beckett, 1995: 66). The tragedy of incommunication that these characters suffer is manifest in this passage from *The Calmative*. Perplexed when they cannot articulate a single word, they envisage the danger of falling into silence, certainly the most extreme expression of the inadequacy of language. Remember the almost done for narrator of *The End*: “Even the words desert you, it’s as bad as that” (97). If words disappear, so does the *I*.

### 4. Epilogue: The voice of silence

The man who pledged in 1937 to make an ‘assault against words’ and write the ‘literature of the unword’ has to make do with words. Like Mauthner, who needs three thick volumes to conclude that only with silence he could have brought his enterprise to a satisfactory end, Beckett undertakes his task well aware of his being condemned to fail. “All that the Beckettian author can conclude is that the *I* is not-*I*, that the coveted original one is no-one; that there is no-thing to be said and no-where to be journeyed to”, says Richard Kearney (1987: 360), and we would add, that there are sounds that emerge softly from the silence and so resemble it (cf. Beckett, 1995: 37), but are not.

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