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Research Article

Haunting Words, Fluid Moods: Affect in Samuel Beckett's *Mercier and Camier*

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ABSTRACT

Originally written in French in 1946 and translated by the author himself, Samuel Beckett's *Mercier and Camier* tells the story of a pseudo-couple wandering through an unnamed city. Despite the narrator's mocking tone, this quest narrative gradually reveals a search for meaning, punctuated by crises and revealed through the nonsensical dialogues between characters. By means of the disjunctions, verbal irrelevancies, and gaps in thought found in these dialogues, the narrative registers affective transitions and passages of feeling. This kind of narrative disjunction is determined, produced, and reproduced within a particularly affective milieu where social encounters become catalysts for emotional disorientation. This paper will examine how the novel's use of casual conversation explores affect's infiltration into ways of acting and speaking in everyday encounters. The novel's investment in an excessive amount of random talk solicits a host of questions around the idea of affect not only as state of mind but also as a narrative mood determining the conditions of meaningfulness. Focusing on theories of affect, I will explore the link between affective experience and verbal expression in *Mercier and Camier*, particularly in the absence of narrative logic and reflective coherence.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, affect theory, dialogue, narrative

Introduction

Ever since the notion of affect became widely popular in various fields of thought, it has been mostly used to define the unrepresentable aspects of human sensibility, distinct from the representational and physiological power of standard emotions. Gregg and Seigworth wrote about affect as being a "passage of forces and intensities… [those] visceral forces beneath, alongside or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion - that can serve to drive us toward movement, thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us" (2010, p. 1). These "vital forces insisting beyond emotion" refer to imperceptible bodily changes and passings over that occur in relation to an environment of causes and catalyzers. In this context, affect designates "the felt passages of transient existence - of 'going over' or 'passing away'" (Pethick, 2015, p. 72), namely the elusive mental imprints of what is felt in the body.[1] When dealing with affect, one therefore is not dealing with determinate emotional changes, psychologies, or the recognizable ideas that embody them.[2] Rather, affect points toward a site of transition that not only registers the body's experience of continuous change by way of thresholds that can only be felt but also incites a series of ideas that attach themselves to these sites of feeling. As such, affects constantly reorganize the ways in which the body acts. I will be drawing upon this definition of affect as a force that drives or inhibits subjects, suspends frames of thought, and mystifies meaning in Beckett's *Mercier and Camier*.

The Affective Framework

A point common to several theorizations of affect is its fundamental resistance to representation, especially language. Given the autonomy ascribed to bodily affect in the contemporary conceptions of affect, the causal relationship ascribed to affects (bodily behavior) and subjective attitude becomes questionable. In "The Autonomy of Affect" Massumi (1995) claimed affect to have an autonomous character and to operate autonomously through the body. In other words, it is not defined in terms of recognition

1 In his study on Nietzsche and affects, Pethick described affectivity in terms of a transitional relationality: "… affects also describe various moods or attitudes that again betray some kind of transitional relationality (or pathos), although this should not be strictly identified with psychological emotional states in the sense of happiness or despondency" (2015, p. 72).

2 Affect solicits a revision of the mind-body dichotomy in such a way that by doing so, it also re-examines the role of the body for human emotion. Whether they celebrate it or dismiss it, affect theorists ranging from Spinoza to William James, dealt with some bodily feeling or change that precedes cognition and reflection to the extent that the subject endures these lived passages of feeling.

and can only be felt. What Massumi calls "intensity" is the duration of the affect that is felt in the body, and it has a different order than that of emotion, which is the "insertion of intensity [*sic*] into narrativizable action-reaction circuits" (1995, p. 88). In this sense, affect is "a non-conscious, never-to-conscious autonomic remainder" felt in the body and is "disconnected from meaningful sequencing" (1995, p. 85). Affect marks the autonomous force of a passing through in the body beyond human will and cognition. Based on this distinction between emotion and affect, affect appears as an impersonal, or rather pre-personal, force of life whose perception continually escapes recognition but whose presence is felt paradoxically through this escape in the sense of a continual passage of felt intensities. This kind of autonomy gives a special quality to the relationship between affect and linguistic expression. Massumi argued (1995, p. 96) that affect can be said to be enclosed in a structure (i.e., an emotion that belongs to the individual) to the extent that what escapes cognitive understanding can be re-registered in a semantic framework. According to Massumi, because affect is beyond conscious perception, what constitutes narratable emotional orientations in the subject is the potentiality of affect, the fact that it cannot be captured as a consciously perceptible feeling of the subject. In Patricia T. Clough's words, "It is its participation in the virtual that gives affect its autonomy-its escape from the particular thing that embodies it" (2010, p. 210). Paradoxically, affective escape conditions emotional orientations, which then become the basis of individual behavior. Between the body's participation in affective experience and the individual's physical and verbal behavior, however, lies a relationship of indeterminacy. This kind of indeterminacy conditions many of the verbal and social behaviors in the novel in the absence of cognitive understanding. In this sense, not only are narrative context and setting problematic in the novel, but Beckett's compulsive preoccupation with what is famously called "absurdist" dialogue also points to obscurities, irrelevancies, blockages, and automatisms as a re-registering of affect. In contrast to the cognitive explanation of affect, which focuses on emotional content and determinable psychological states, the autonomy theory of affect emphasizes the "ignored questions of what role and aesthetic impact form, genre, or style might have in presenting emotion in a distinctly literary way" (Houen, 2020, p. 5). This paves the way for an understanding of language as an irreducibly affective notion entangled in the various ways in which this escape from felt change can be expressed.

One of the ways in which affect's escape from consciousness informs language and verbal moods is related to what Spinoza calls a "bondage" to the body (Spinoza & Curley, 1994, p. 197). The autonomy ascribed to affect gives rise to the idea of the body as an

indeterminate field. In Spinoza's words, "the body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its mind wonders at" (1994, p. 156).Accordingly, the human body's ways of affection can either diminish or increase its power to act. Spinoza also writes, "By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections" (1994, p. 154).[3] These modifications with their capacity to either increase or diminish the power to act give way to two polar moods of joy and sadness, and the subject finds themself in continuous variation between these two mental states. In this sense, a specific relationship exists between one's capacity to act (and speak) and the complex ways in which one's body is triggered by the changes one goes through. Deleuze (1978) argued in his notes regarding Spinoza's concept of affect that the body's way of manifesting motion, what Spinoza termed the continuous variation, is generated by an encounter. Deleuze wrote, "When I have an encounter such that the relation of the body which modifies me, which acts on me is combined with my own relation, with the characteristic relation of my own body, [*sic*] I would say that my power of acting is increased" (1978, para. 27). Similarly, if the object of the encounter does not agree with one's body, then the power of acting is decreased. If affect registers a felt passage as part of the body's set of responses to some encounter (i.e., a change in the body itself), it equally designates the idea attached to these changes. For Spinoza as well as Deleuze, then the idea of an affection is what either increases or diminishes the power to act.[4] Indeed the quintessence of affective experience is the fact that one is taken hostage by ideas of affection and that "we are completely enclosed in this world of affection-ideas" (Deleuze, 1978, para. 38). Regardless of whether one's power to act is increased or diminished, as long as one experiences these passions, or in Deleuze's words, "pass[es] by all these continuous variations," one is separated from one's own power to act: "I am not the cause of my own affects, and since I am not the cause of my own affects, they are produced in me by something else: I am therefore passive, I'm in the world of passion" (para. 38). This seems akin to Heidegger's explanation of moods in *Being and Time* as "disclosed *prior to* cognition and volition and *beyond* their range of disclosure" (2008, p. 175). According to Heidegger, one finds oneself in

3 Spinoza claimed that when subjects experience these modifications without cognition, without strict awareness of what they are, where they come from, or what they are caused by, then these should be called "passions" (1994, p. 154). In fact one is passive with respect to what goes through the body and mind when one is not the sole cause of one's acts

4 Deleuze explained affection as follows: "It's a state of body insofar as it is subject to the action of another body" (1978, para. 38). In other words, it is the effect of bodies on bodies through which the continual variation between the two affects of sadness and joy take place.

a mood because "when we master a mood, we do so by way of a counter-mood; we are never free of moods" (2008, p. 175). Whether because of the enigmatic character of a mood or ideas of affection, subjects are continually invested in these modifications. Because one continually finds oneself in moods (i.e., the varying dispositions of the body), one simply experiences them, and the transitions they bring out, even if they are imperceptible, have a profound impact on how one acts.

Given the entanglement of affective experience, subjective mood, and language, that a feedback loop occurs between the unknowing feeling body and the speaking body/mind is a fair suggestion. Rather counterintuitively, one could also argue that affect not only escapes understanding but also that affect's escape from understanding is inescapable. Will, intention, belief, freedom, speech, thought, and action are in this sense all informed by the ideas, moods, passages, and intensities of affect. In this regard, the study of affective experience leads to a reconsideration of the relationship between mind and language, as it points to the fact that the activities of the mind are also irreducibly linked to the degree of vitality felt by the body. For Spinoza these bodily changes which in turn affect one's power to act also determine the ways in which one express oneself through language. Spinoza went on to write, "And then I believe everyone has found by experience that the mind is not always equally capable of thinking of the same object, but that as the body is more susceptible to having the image of this or that object aroused in it, so the mind is more capable of regarding this or that object" (1994, p. 156). In saying this, he problematized the causal connection ascribed to the mind-body relationship. The actions of the body, including speech, cannot be said to copy the mental content of the mind. Rather, the degree of the body' susceptibility to a particular mental image is what causes the mind to think of that object. Therefore, the dictates of the body's ways is what determine the will to think or speak about things. In separating the human mind from the primacy of agency and free will, Spinoza claimed that one's actions and products of the mind are in fact driven by what they called "appetites," (i.e., passions and desires) and cannot be thought independently of the ways of the body: "the decisions of the mind are nothing but the appetites themselves, which therefore vary as the disposition of the body varies."

Through affect's resistance to representation, affect resultantly signifies formlessness, escape, and evasion; the openness to affect keeps the body in a state of "yet-ness" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 3), which is a continuation of Spinoza's famous statement "No one has yet determined what the body can do" (1994, p. 155). Another aspect of

this bodily indeterminacy, however, is the troubling presence of the "affection-idea," and it is precisely from this presence, from the idea that "the mind cannot control the passions of the body," that bondage arises (Lord, 2010, p. 87). Spinoza reminds readers of the casualness of this situation, of how mental states and affects manifest in the body and in the mind not in causal relation to each other but as attributes of the same substance, because, as Nadler explains "passions come about not through the logical order of thought but from the common order of nature" (Nadler, 2006, p. 194). This lack of logical order between passion and thought, body and mind, and affect and speech allows for a rethinking of speech in close relation to the question of bodily and affective indeterminacy, in which speech emerges as the result of the way the body is affected. I believe that this tension between escape and bondage proves fruitful for the study of the relationship between affect and language in *Mercier and Camier*, as it points to the paradoxical effects of the mostly passive affects in the characters' relationships with their encounters. These interrelated aspects are what guide this study of the connections between affect and everyday speech in the novel. This particular resonance between the body (and hence the states of mind associated with it) and language has tremendous implications for the subjects' power not only to transform through various moods but also to digress and dissipate verbally, psychologically, and socially in the novel. In what follows, I will first analyze how out-of-context dialogues imply affective transitions before considering the ways in which Mercier and Camier's relationship to random things can lead to an idea of narrative meaning that is primarily affected by passages, moods, and indecision.

Affect's Escape in *Mercier and Camier*: Idle talk, Misconstruction, and Violence

Despite the novel's exhaustive use of dialogue, *Mercier and Camier* seems to undermine the motivation for conversation by articulating the redundancy of the whole act. The novel opens with the self-assured words of the narrator: "The journey of Mercier and Camier is one I can tell, if I will, for I was with them all the time" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 3), though the fact that the narrator is far from reliable soon becomes clear. Almost nothing of what is said between the two parties is sufficiently or accurately remembered, but minute details, irrelevancies and divergences are recorded consistently throughout the narrative. This is obvious from the first episode in which Mercier and Camier arrive at their meeting place, a public garden, without really knowing much about either the place or their choice of the place: "Mercier and Camier did not know

the place. Hence no doubt their choice of it for their meeting. Certain things shall never be known for sure" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 5). Forgetting the point and evading the subject at hand are ironically common components of Mercier and Camier's dialogues, and this inability to retrieve the truth in a Platonic sense helps in generating another kind of truth, or rather an extra-truth, an unpronounced truth transmitted by clichés, idioms, and formulaic expressions. This paradox is particularly important for exploring how the dialogues function affectively, assuming they fail to introduce a common ground or resolve an issue in the traditional sense.

One such dialogue takes place in Chapter Seven. In the scene where Mercier and Camier encounter the grave of an Irish nationalist, the narrator recounts a long and tedious dialogue filled with a ridiculous amount of politeness. Even if memory fails, the implication that the grave is some sort of political symbol is clear: "'I once knew,' said Mercier, 'but no longer.' 'I too once knew,' said Camier, 'I'm almost sure.' But he was not quite sure. It was the grave of a nationalist, brought here in the night by the enemy and executed, or perhaps only the corpse brought here, to be dumped" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], pp. 81–82).[5] They seem to be captured by a commonplace responsibility to say a few words about the tragedy; however, in the awkwardness of the scene, they are at a loss for words:

> Pardon, said Camier, what was that you said? No, no, said Mercier, you.
> No no, said Camier, nothing of interest.
> No matter, said Mercier, let's have it.
> I assure you, said Camier.
> I beg of you, said Mercier.
> After you, said Camier.
> I interrupted you, said Mercier.
> I interrupted you, said Camier.
> Silence fell again. Mercier broke it, or rather Camier. Have you caught a chill, said Mercier. (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 82)

The linguistic redundancy signifies that something inaccessible in a narrative sense must have happened in this encounter. Mercier and Camier seem indifferent to the nationalist's grave, to say the least. Yet, such indifference is manifested too obviously

5 In her biography on Beckett, Deirdre Bair (wrote, "Irishmen with longer memories than Mercier and Camier will recall that the patriot was named Noel Lemass: his family, though now Catholic, are of Huguenot descent. The unpretentious monument is now a familiar landmark to those who walk over the Dublin Mountains" (1990, p. 721).

considering the ridiculous interruption here. Through this obvious indifference, the novel intimates a disturbing historical encounter divorced from context and meaning. This form of decontextualization emerges as a narrative preference by which the novel installs and then inverts historical references and social and emotional meanings. This is an important paradox that the novel plays with. Dialogue serves to signal both a blockage that prevents the characters from acting properly or as expected, as well as an escape from narrative stability that heightens suspense and demands more meaning in a meaningless narrative universe. When the characters find themselves in places such as the grave, the effect of their found-ness not only confuses their sense of place and time but also governs the body's desire to move on aimlessly, both physically and verbally. This bondage to the body's whims manifests itself through idle talk, drowning the characters in a pool of affective associations, verbal currents, and "affection-ideas" that "know things only by their effects" without knowing the causes (Deleuze, 1978, para. 20). The nationalist's story is implicated neither in the form of a revelation of truth nor by commentary but by the detour of an affective escape within a dialogue, in the form of a tension veiled by verbal redundancy. Unable to detect the cause of this halt followed by empty talk, both the characters and the readers remain under the influence of an indeterminacy. If a passive affect mostly takes place in the absence of the "active conceptual grasp of a changing body under the influence of an encounter" (Protevi, 2020, p. 69), then the novel uses verbal redundancy and automatism as a resistance to the conceptual as well as narrative grasp of situations such as this, blurring the lines between meaningfulness and meaninglessness by resorting to superficial and everyday uses of language. What seems easily signifiable and graspable further complicates the interpretation of the scene. The descriptive passage before this scene is telling of a tension between distance and closeness: "All seems flat, or gently undulating, and there at a stone's throw these high crags, all unsuspected by the wayfarer" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 81). Everything in the landscape seems visible, and yet they are too far to really discern. This tension makes the characters hesitate to speak when the object of the encounter seems too intimate and yet too fragile because its idea is vague. In Massumi's words, "An emotional qualification breaks narrative continuity for a moment to register a state - actually re-register an already felt-state (for the skin is faster than the word)" (1995, p. 86). Often, this re-registration takes the form of redundant speech and allows one to locate and extrapolate affective tones where semantic gaps occur.

Mercier and Camier's loss for words also manifests a sense of temporal delay found in affective experience. Even if they change places or even if the encounter is new, the

experience seems to linger on. In this way they find themselves in moods: "They spoke, fell silent, listened to each other, stopped listening, each as he fancied or as bidden from within" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 16). In fact, throughout the novel, any kind of engagement for Mercier and Camier requires a certain passivity that goes to such outrageous lengths as to make situations incomprehensible for them. One is able to discern a temporal delay in words because "What happens to the body is not immediately decided upon" (Colebrook, 2020, p. 430). Affectivity is "not the simple effect of what is outside the body but a registering of that effect without the body yet taking action or generating a specific emotion" (Colebrook, 2020, p. 430). For Mercier and Camier, this delay is mostly embodied in verbal automatism as a form of compensation. They appear as if they are continually forced to find words. Their contact with things and places inscribes in them an appetite for speaking awkwardly and a desire to fill the gaps, which implies a profound disturbance with silence and self-reflection. Verbal automatism emerges as a way in which the characters seek a sense of solace by distraction.

These gaps and shifts of attention often occur in such a way that the emotional content produced by an affective experience seems profoundly misinterpreted. In such cases, affective experiences lead not only to verbal automatisms but also to eruptions of physical and verbal violence that gradually become commonplace. Violence is a significant sign of mental confusion, and the violent mood manifests itself in relation to the misinterpretation. For instance, the encounter with the grave is preceded by a murder scene, in which the characters kill a constable by "[clubbing] the defenseless skull with [all his] might" because of a misunderstanding (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 76). These two experiences with two different authority figures influence each other in such a way that the violent mood of the death scene carries over into the melancholy mood of the grave scene. Mercier and Camier leave the scene of the crime in the after-effects of the violence they have inflicted on the constable's body. They walk "through a tumult of shadow and clamour, stumbling on the cobbles strewn already with black boughs …" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 76). Their hesitant physical movement continues through the grave scene. In both scenes, an emotional processing remains yet to be done, and an affective transition occurs when different encounters keep alive a lingering idea of melancholy and even nihilism. In the context of a misunderstanding, the affective experience can be identified in terms of what Freud (1963, p. 126) called "unconscious emotion [in which] an affect or an emotion is perceived but misconstrued. By the repression of its proper presentation, it is forced to become connected with another idea." This kind of misjoining of affect and idea differs both from the notion of the ideas

of affection as well as from the fundamental resistance of affect to content. The body may manifest the presence of an affect through verbal digressions or the sensation of some bodily disturbance, such as trembling or coughing (what actually breaks the silence at the end of the first dialogue is unclear), but the cognitive value of actions, thoughts, and speech is missing. Freud (1963, p. 126) seems to suggest that not only does a simple delay in the construction of content for the felt affect occur but also and more importantly so does the construction of false content. In this sense, affective content is mostly phenomenally present in the subject's relationship to the world, but it is inhibited in the process of misconstruction. Although this explanation points to the presence of emotional content whose essence is constantly overlooked, it does not deny the perception of affect itself. For Freud, the idea of affect (i.e., what it stands for) may be unconscious, but the affect is consciously felt. Freud's emphasis on the misconstrued ideas of consciously felt affects helps one to consider the self-conscious aspect of Mercier and Camier's affective experience. Even though they attach false ideas to their affective experiences, even though they are at a loss for words to describe the effect that is happening to them, and even though they misunderstand things, they are equally driven by an inexorable urge to understand what is happening to them. As the narrator keeps reminding the reader, this journey is futile and yet seems imbued with the possibility of meaning: "… now exposed to the full fury of the wind, now through zones of calm, Mercier striving to grasp the full consequences for them of what had chanced … But they strove in vain" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 77). This sense of delay and misunderstanding simultaneously marks the presence of an unfulfilled desire to grasp the affective experience, why they feel the way they do. This self-conscious urge to understand the inaccessible marks the Beckettian gesture par excellence, as it also points to the peculiarity of Beckett's construction of an affective and reflective narrative, full of potential for transformation and meaning, yet equally arrested by banality, silence, and anxiety.

Narrative Mood and Communicational Failure: Affect's Unsociability

If this type of blabbering functions as an unconscious urge that shows itself in a resistance to cognitive and emotional meanings, it produces a type of speech in which communication continually fails. It eliminates the social character and function of feelings in a literary universe dominated by random occurrences and the indeterminacy of affective experience. As Mercier and Camier drift through moods

and tensions, their social relationships open tensions that also lead to violence. For example, Mercier has an emotionally difficult experience after encountering two children who claim to be his. They appear in the middle of one of his broodings. Mercier seems embittered by the children's presence and is vicious to them because of their apparent dependence on him. Whether the children are his or just a vision, this particular encounter makes Mercier sentimental, giving him a sense of self-containment: "'There are days,' said Mercier, 'one is born every minute. Then the world is full of shitty little Mericers. It's hell. Oh, but to cease!'" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 24). This intensely dramatic scene is muted because it overlaps with another tragedy. After this scene when he sees a woman killed in an accident, Mercier feels a strange sense of catharsis, saying, "I feel a new man already," and the narrator claims Mercier is "in fact transfigured" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 25). Just like the absurd dialogue that allows them to deviate from the intensity of the scenes, the satisfaction of another body being destroyed distracts Mercier from the implied heavy impact of the encounter with the children. Tragic affect is kept at bay first by Mercier's mock-soliloquy and then by the pseudo-cathartic experience. In both instances, fear is veiled in a ridiculous retort. However, Mercier's emotional outburst is unwarranted, exaggerated, and confusing, to say the least. Even more confusing is the fact that no real context is found by which the narrator can refer to the presence of the children. Persons appear and disappear at dream-like intervals in the novel; they trigger affects and arouse moods before dissolving into the voids of the narrative. These random appearances and disappearances act in the manner of idle talk, as the sudden outburst of a seemingly pent-up energy that reveals itself through its escape from narrativization.

According to Nussbaum, "we learn how to feel [*sic*] from our society," and these social constructs called emotions do not come directly to someone in the form of "propositional claims about the world [but] they are taught through stories" (1990, p. 287). Stories allow the subjects to understand, interpret, narrate, and express emotions. This defines the way in which subjects escape the bondage implied by affect. Paradoxically, Beckett makes use of several representations of interaction in the form of dialogue only to problematize this social character of emotion, compromising meaningfulness altogether. Resistance to narration in the novel stems from a compulsion to focus on distractions, sudden emotional eruptions, and hovering ideas of affection, with narrative disjunction ultimately emerging as the resistance to tell a story. This is the sense in which the articulation of affect and style of speech are irrevocably linked in the novel. The characters' random responses fail to operate in relation to a "mechanism of mediation" that opens the way

for self-reflexivity and self-understanding (Redding, 1999, p. 135).[6] Through this escape from self-reflexivity in a profoundly human sense, affect comes to dominate social interactions in the novel. In the rest of the scene before the accident, Mercier crushes the cake Camier had brought him through his fingers. As in the grave scene where a random physical sign breaks the silence at the end, here too attention is focused on a physical act that takes place between two objects or two bodies that affect each other. The cake gushes between Mercier's fingers, and the tears "flow, overflow" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 24). These images point to misconnections in a universe where random bodies affect one another in most unexpected ways. Objects and bodies communicate, or rather miscommunicate, by means of their effects on each other. Unable to turn these affects to personal codes for self-understanding in a meaningful relation to the world, the characters speak a language that is semantically empty and yet over-coded with affective meanings. Failed social interaction further contributes to this sense of disintegration, in which objects and people disappear into oblivion, psychic processes are subordinated to physical ones, and conscious mental content seems indefinitely delayed. Mercier and Camier's social interactions are seemingly rooted in apathy and indifference while being irrevocably affected by the unrecognizable effects of the things that happen to them, and their whimsical journey is replete with chance encounters with "a long line of maleficent beings" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 8).

In fact, Mercier and Camier are often disturbed by the feeling that they "[do not go] unobserved" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 13). This tension is most manifestly articulated by Mercier in the grave scene: "'Strange impression,' said Mercier, 'strange impression sometimes that we are not alone. You not?'" (2010 [1946], p. 83). With the reference to a haunting third party, Beckett points to a very specific risk that pertains to oral communication. Michel Serres (1982, p. 66) calls this the "risk of losing meaning in noise" (1982, p. 66). "To minimize this risk, two interlocutors in dialogue" are considered as united against the phenomena of interference and confusion… [and t]o hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him" (1982, p. 67). A common enemy is sought and defeated through dialogue. This maxim also describes the purpose of dialogue, which is consensus. But consensus does not define agreement between one and another. For Serres, it instead defines a "coupling," an alliance against a third party. The sensed presence of a third party

6 Tomkins wrote, "While biologically grounded, affect is freed from the determinacy of the biological: by means of the feedback that the feeling subject receives in the affective responses of others as well as its own further response to this feedback, a child comes to have affective responses to its own first-order affects (as when, for example, one feels shame at one's fear). It is by such mechanisms of mediation that the child is induced into existing patterns of socially codified 'ideo-affective postures'" (as cited in Redding 1999, p. 135).

is indeed the enemy (of affect) whose presence the characters cannot help but feel throughout the novel. It is a haunting, a disturbance generated by unspoken anxieties and non-narratable affective relations expressed in terms of random signs and random talk throughout the novel. In fact, this air of enigma that threatens the possibility of communication can easily be attributed to the study of affects with regard to Beckett. Beckett's narrators often play with the limits of emotional communicability by withdrawing from obvious elements of communication such as speech as the very factor of readability. As Piette argued in his study of Beckett's *Ill-Seen Ill*-Said, what Beckett's writing captures is not affect but "unreadability of affect – inscrutability, not clear affect-signals" (2011, p. 290). This haunting is articulated as a threat to the possibility of emotional readability and resonates in Mercier's words as he is plagued by the presence of a parrot, whose eyes, the narrator recounts, are "filled with unspeakable bewilderment and distress" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 20) and who seems to remain in a leaning position as if he were listening in. Another cathartic moment ensues the description of the haunting parrot where Mercier is once again seized by a longing for annihilation: "The longing will take me to throw myself out of the window but I'll master it" (2010 [1946], p. 20). Disguised as the parrot, the enemy is the dubious authority of the narrator, the perplexed reader who enjoys the violence of language and the automatisms caused by affect all at once. These veiled anxieties reveal themselves not only through such transferences but also through the fact that Mercier and Camier are followed by a third party in the form of Mr. Conaire, a detective who is on the hunt for them. And their desire for either escape or dissolution ends in total blunder, opening the narrative to further miscommunications and mishaps. Despite their seeming rhetorical efforts to avoid cacophony, the risk of meaninglessness haunts them. This risk itself registers in the characters as "an indefinite fear of nothing in particular, [anxiety] allows no escape through avoidance, just as it impels no specific course of action; it is a tension in which one remains free, but entangled in one's freedom: oscillating, vacillating, powerless to act" (Smith, 2010, p. 202). The power of affect not only diminishes the power to act but also the power to cognize, organize, and structure. Perhaps also in this regard is why the novel's humor is quite disturbing in a world full of chance encounters. It is the humor of something missing, something forgotten or irreversibly gone, such as the complete erasure of identity and story or loss of emotional expression.

Rambling: An Affective Terrain

That *Mercier and Camier*'s narrative underscores the role of affect in everyday encounters by presenting idle talk as a mark of inescapability from such an affective

world and by subordinating the power of the subject to the affections of the body seems fair to suggest. But can this lack of escape still be transformative, still be empowering? Although the novel is imbued with the tension of understanding and making sense in the face of oblivion, the act of talking about random things also allows the characters to distract themselves from who they are, from their personal tragedies and fears of abandonment: "Looking back on it … we heard ourselves speaking of everything but ourselves" (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 97). They become ridiculously preoccupied with random things in the terrain after their encounter with the grave:

> Will you look at that heather, said Camier. Mercier looked with ostentation at the heather and whistled incredulously. Underneath there is turf, said Camier. One would never think so, said Mercier. Camier coughed again. Do you think there are worms, said Camier, the same as in the earth? Turf has remarkable properties, said Mercier. But are there worms? said Camier. Shall we dig a little hole and see? said Mercier. Certainly not, said Camier, what an idea. He coughed a third time. (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 83)[7]

The furtive sign of coughing and the repetitive mention of turfs and worms further complicate the humorously exaggerated appreciation of the landscape expressed by the characters. The tense mood is expressed through obvious bodily signs such as coughing as if to almost spit out the truth. Landscape is not just something to be appreciated in small talk but also a territory burdened with a pent-up tension that reveals itself through random signs; it marks untranslatable affects that simply become comical. Once again, empty talk provides a form of distraction from the seeming intensity of the grave scene. In the end, this kind of randomness seems to signify nothing more than a comic escape. This escape, however, appears not only as a flight from fear and anxiety but also as a flight from cultural symbols, emotional orientations, and reactionary language. Although Mercier and Camier become masters of a language that at times seems to elude mental content, in such instances their language demonstrates a certain resistance to the cultural past's demand for a dialogical

7 Will you look at that heather, said Camier.
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He coughed a third time. (p. 83)

relationship. As they traverse what appears to be Dublin, they are confronted with memories, symbols, traditions, and mannerisms that are irrevocably charged with confused associations. They further confuse these associations by responding ambiguously to their surroundings. The nationalist's grave turns out to be yet another empty sign that inspires a flow of speech whose subject matter ranges from turfs to worms. Something genuinely disengaged is present in Mercier and Camier's speech, a speech overcome by the literal pleasure of imitating the speech of anonymous crowds, taking on the desire to verbally regurgitate in such feigned expressions as "how aggravating" uttered at the sight of the grave (Beckett, 2010 [1946], p. 82).

What kind of power might lie behind this flow of language? For Deleuze and Guattari (2005), such a flow requires a certain relation to the outside; in other words, a certain vulnerability to being affected.[8] They find in the figure of the nomad a certain relation "with the forces of the outside, … an exteriority of thought [that serves to destroy the] model of the True, the Just or the Right" (p. 377). As such, they quote Artaud saying "[thought operates] on the basis of a central breakdown,… [and on an] incapacity to take on form" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, p. 378) or a constant capacity to scatter and digress into many forms. This is the language of pathos, not yet organized or signified but in direct resonance with exteriority, a form of affection manifested in the fluctuating forces of the body. With regard to Beckett, a genre historically associated with good thought and synthesis is literally misused as the material for disjunctive or otherwise immaterial thought. One sees this breakdown not only in the characters' resistance to or misinterpretation of conscious mental content but also in their affected language, which seems to be controlled by their chance encounters and mixed with associations coming from the environment. As Mercier and Camier's speech breaks down, disintegrates, and moves farther away from its intended meaning, it becomes more vulnerable to expressing what escapes expression. This paradox becomes empowering when nothing is actually found to say, and yet using the famous Beckettian formula, the body drives itself to speak in the disruption of the mind's cognitive capacity.[9] This paradox allows the characters to relate to cultural symbols nonetheless, to resist authority figures and

8 In the chapter "A Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine" in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explored the relationship of the state, or more generally of authority and (self)disciplined subjectivity, to what they called "the [established] image of thought", which they argue has an immediate relationship to historical, ideological, canonical, and scientific ways of thinking about mental activity (2005, p. 376).

9 In Beckett's "Three Dialogues," where he is in conversation with art critic Georges Duthuit, he expresses the necessity of expression in the absence of its possibility in the modern world: "… there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (2001 [1949], p. 139).

to invent forms of speech in the absence of relation or meaning. The paradox of language lies in the way it reveals itself as "a lighting that withdraws from understanding as it founds the very possibility of understanding" (Bourassa, 2002, p. 62). This happens specifically through the body's pre-reflective tendency to speak, which gradually removes the burden of not only being conscious of one's mental content but also of the cultural symbols that are burdened with heavy meaning. In this way, Mercier and Camier resign themselves to the undisciplined fluidity of their tongues. Through awkward speech and behavior, Mercier and Camier are able to transform the implications of affection into proper moments of action, even if that action is idle talk that lacks coherent structure and meaning.

Conclusion

Through representations of idle talk, verbal mannerisms, and rambling, *Mercier and Camier*'s narrative registers affective transitions and inarticulate passages of feeling in the form of narrative discontinuity and indeterminacy. The novel shows how language is entangled in affective experience and how everyday forms of speech can be determined by unjustified desires, urges, and bodily affects, especially in the absence of secure forms of interaction. In this context, everyday language serves to reveal positive and negative affects that lead to tensions and diminutions of power, as well as liberations from expectations, established identities and cultural history, even if this sometimes ends in violence and self-destruction. In line with the idea of affect as an unrepresentable form of thought caused by a bodily affection, Beckett explores in *Mercier and Camier*'s ridiculous, outrageous retorts and dialogues the power of flows of speech as a way of making sense when all recourse to meaningfulness fails. The novel does this by exploiting small talk, by presenting social communication as an irretrievably failed act, and by using empty talk to blur the boundaries between humor and tension and between meaning and meaninglessness. Affectivity appears as "a registering of that [external] effect without the body yet taking action or generating a specific emotion" (Colebrook, 2020, p. 430). This moment of indecision seems to last indefinitely in the narrative, disintegrating the narrative form to the extent that the story itself seems disjunctive and inessential. In this sense, the novel represents a peculiar form of affected language characterized by delays, repetitions, cycles, and automatisms. Failed social interaction further equivocates the notion of communicability and emotional readability, in which conversations simply suggest a map of affective signs, redundancies, evasions, and passages registered through

irrelevant language.

Contrary to its historical meaning, dialogue is not a remedy for epistemological uncertainty, noise, violence, and narrative incoherence in the novel, but it does open an affective milieu that provides ground for escape from dominant meanings in the form of both misinterpretation and detachment. In the absence of a sense of sociality and self-reflexivity, the meanings of failed interactions, displaced emotions, and overwhelming affective relations point to transformations of meaning. If participating in social situations involves "an embodied 'being there' [*and*] a plurality of affective relations, perceptions and perspectives" (Pethick 2015, pp. 96–97), the novel continually draws attention to this kind of plurality by inscribing a web of affective relations and signs where meaningful communication should be. An affective reading of *Mercier and Camier*'s ambiguous absurd dialogues allows one to reconsider Beckett's early language as a form of experimentation that informs the quick-fire language of his later plays. More importantly, it points to Beckett's use of idle talk as a way of exploring the conditions of meaning in terms of its problematic relationship to emotional representation. Thus, far from being meaningless, *Mercier and Camier*'s mostly digressive and elusive dialogues point to specific intersections that might offer insights into the ways in which everyday speech carries more affective motives and disturbances than one might think.

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