Introduction: 'I Only Have One Language; It Is Not Mine' or *Khôra* & The Sovereign

Ensconced within another quote, the only textual fragment of Samuel Beckett's work within Jacques Derrida's published corpus appears in *Clang*. It is a quote from *Molloy* where the homonymous character discusses how he named his mother:

> I called her Mag, when I had to call her something. And I called her Mag because for me, without my knowing why, the letter g abolished the syllable Ma, and as it were spat on it, better than any other letter would have done. And at the same time I satisfied a deep and doubtless unacknowledged need, the need to have a Ma, that is a mother, and to proclaim it, audibly. For before you say mag, you say ma, inevitably. And da, in my part of the world, means father. Besides, for me the question did not arise, at the period I'm working into now, I mean the question of whether to call her Ma, Mag or the Countess Caca, she having for countless years been as deaf as a post. (Beckett qtd in Derrida, 2021, 258b; Derrida, 1974, 322b)[1]

As this Element will show, it is appropriate that the literary and printed crossroads between these two authors takes place at a point where language, origin, and the maternal body coincide: the *khôratic* space. For it is the question of the literary, philosophical, writing, and/or written subject in front of the possibility of pronouncing its own origin that is at the heart of the modernist coincidence we can call 'Beckett and Derrida'. This significant coincidence has been differently remarked, in the past couple of decades, by scholars such as Steven Connor, Nicholas Royle, Shane Weller, Anthony Uhlmann, Daniel Katz, and even Coetzee, who, in 2006, called it a 'sympathetic vibration' (Coetzee, 2006, xiii). Asja Szafraniec's formidable comparative analysis of their oeuvres, *Derrida, Beckett, and the Event of Literature* (2007), is an obvious predecessor of – and interlocutor to – this Element. Its short epilogue connecting Derrida's and Beckett's desire for a writing beyond mastery was an initial point for this study. Nevertheless, even though it identifies some points of transaction, by focusing more on the philosophical reasons for Derrida's ultimate dismissal of Beckett as an exemplary 'literary event', it disregards its own insights as to the exact nature of their positive 'sympathetic vibration' (Coetzee, 2006, xiii). Such a sympathy lies at the aforementioned zone or *khôratic* space, foundational surface and abyss where language, origin, and the maternal body coincide. Its importance appears – beyond a shared focus on the feminine/maternal body and on its links to the mother tongue and the writer's self-created

[1] When considered relevant, I will give the pagination for the French text after the one from the English translation. Sometimes translations of texts other than Beckett's have been slightly modified to make them more literal.

style – in the ways it opens up the question of the (male) sovereign subject in the second half of the twentieth century. It is precisely this question that, from works like Richard Begam's *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (1996), up to Daniela Caselli's *Insufferable: Beckett, Gender and Sexuality* (2023) – passing through many other recent studies focused on posthumanism, embodiment, and the Anthropocene – points to Beckett's and Derrida's importance as critics of phallogocentrism as a schema founded on a supreme, total, and ultimate totalitarian subject; or, in other words, as deconstructors of the closure of Western metaphysics. While all the previous and contemporary works resonating the vibration between Beckett and Derrida examine or underscore indirectly an angle of their shared space of questioning, this Element proposes to focus directly on one of their and our most urgent ones: *khôra* or the m/other space of chorology as the unthought counterpart and ground of the sovereign modern subject and its logic of presence, power, and oppression, or of what Derrida (2000, 47) called *Bemächtigungstrieb* (from the German *bemächtigen*: to seize, possess, overpower). This chorology facing sovereignty and totalitarian drives is 'the *différantial* space that lies between modernism and antimodernism' described by Begam (1996, 7), the space where the modern subject confronts its genetic, metaphysic, sociopolitical, and literary aporias. It is also the 'breach' or the space 'prior to separation' that Trezise (1990, 28) saw in his Derridean reading of Beckett's impossibility to express, as a shared critique of the sovereignty of the phenomenological subject, or of the power to express by completely separating itself from the *khôratic* ground.[2] Therefore, in order to begin to listen to this sympathetic vibration in its complex *khôratic* space, and since *khôra* designates as well a region or land, we must look at the biographical and cultural context of both authors, while focusing on the questions of their languages, origins, and cultural identities.

Born in El Biar, in French Algeria, on 15 July 1930, Jacques 'Jackie' Derrida (named after Jackie Coogan, the child actor in Chaplin's 1921 *The Kid*) experienced the complicated upbringing of a Francophone Jewish Algerian 'Maghrébin', a French citizen of the colony of Algeria, growing up during World War II. Even before he was born, his origin had a complex linguistic and cultural dimension since the Derrida family had emigrated from Spain to France before 1870, when Algerian Jews received French nationality through the Crémieux Decree. Years later, Derrida would talk about the trauma of having lost his French nationality (even before he had visited France) as an Algerian

[2] While Trezise does not use the term '*khôra*' (since the homonymous essay by Derrida was not published until 1993, three years after *Into the Breach*), he does characterise the 'breach' as the *khôratic* space of a 'general economy', a 'pre-originary' involvement, or an 'immemorial dispossession' before the separation of the sovereign *cogito*.

Jew for two years during the occupation: 'I lost it for years without having another. You see, not the least one' (Derrida, 1998, 15). Having not learnt Hebrew, nor Berber or Arabic, let alone Spanish, but only the language of the coloniser, French, together with French mainland culture, Derrida described his complicated ownership of this given language with the statement: 'I only have one language; it is not mine' (Derrida, 1998, 1). While he characterised his relation to French in this way during a conference in April 1992 at Louisiana State University (in a text that would become *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*; 1996), he had already described such a pseudo-ownership of his own language, in 1989, precisely in the context of a question regarding Samuel Beckett.

When asked on this occasion by his interviewer, Derek Attridge, if he was planning to write on Beckett one day (since he had already mentioned Beckett in another interview; Kearny, 1995), Derrida answered by saying that, due to an extreme proximity with Beckett that he not only felt, but also wanted to feel ('to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close'), it had been too difficult for him to write on Beckett's works (Derrida, 1992, 60). Then he added:

> Too hard also because he writes – in my language, in a language which is his up to a point, mine up to a point (for both of us it is a 'differently' foreign language) – texts which are both too close to me and too distant for me even to be able to 'respond' to them. (60)

By confessing this proximity and this shared complicated relation and pseudo-ownership of the French language, Derrida was referencing Beckett's own linguistic and cultural journey as an Irish-born, French-speaking writer, a descendant of a Huguenot family, who didn't speak the 'national language' of his country of birth,[3] yet could speak Italian and German, and chose French apparently not out of an attempt to master a foreign culture (or to restore a lost familial language), but instead as a paradoxical effort to reduce, if not to lose, mastery over his own writerly activity. Years before he adopted French as his main writerly language after the war, in his 1929 contribution to *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (the *transition* adjacent collective volume in support of Joyce's *Work in Progress*, soon to be titled *Finnegans Wake*), Beckett had already expressed a dissatisfaction with the English language and its abstractions: 'Mr Joyce has desophisticated language. And it is worth remarking that no language is so sophisticated as English. It is abstracted to death' (Beckett, 1984a, 28). The question, at this point, for Beckett, seemed to be how to continue Joyce's labour of 'desophistication' but without being engulfed by

[3] As Alan Graham describes it, 'the perceived nexus between language and identity' was 'one of the most – if not *the* most – politically charged issues in the Ireland of Beckett's youth' (Graham, 2021, 58).

it – a fear expressed at the beginning of the same essay: 'And now here I am, with my handful of abstractions [. . .] and the prospect of self-extension in the world of Mr Joyce's *Work in Progress*' (19).[4] In a similar way as Derrida would express it decades later in the only book of his that inhabited Beckett's personal library, *Ulysse gramophone* (1987), Beckett knew that Joyce's experiment – as valid and necessary as it had been – had gone as far as possible not in spite of but rather because of its mastery and voraciousness, namely its *bemächtigen*. As he expressed it to James Knowlson, two years after *Ulysse gramophone* had come out:

> I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding. (Knowlson, 1996, 319)

This notion of Joyce's project as a literary enterprise of 'addition' resonates thus with Derrida's description of Joyce's oeuvre, in *Ulysse gramophone*, as a 'literature of burden [*somme*] as one speaks of a "beast of burden", literature of summons [*sommation*], moment of the debt' (Derrida, 2013, 69; Derrida, 1987b, 119). As a consequence, the opposite experiment, a literary exercise like Beckett's, based on impoverishment, lack of knowledge, and taking away, could be called – as Derrida agreed, answering to Attridge – essentially 'deconstructive', if not 'deconstruction' itself. What is more, Beckett's chosen adoption of French could also be seen as a way to, through distancing, deconstruct by defamiliarisation his own language and cultural identity (see Dennis, 2019). As a matter of fact, both Beckett and Derrida saw their writerly projects – and, with them, the future of literature and/or philosophy – not in addition, incorporation, comprehensiveness, and totalities. Instead, they saw them in subtraction, reduction, or deconstruction of the encyclopaedic edifices and the 'metaphysical assumptions behind Western thought' (Coetzee, 2006, xiii), literature, and philosophy. The reasons why they both saw this need of subtraction and destructuration lie not only in their personal experiences, but also in the cultural context they shared: World War II and its aftermaths in Europe and beyond. In other words, their aesthetic, literary, and philosophical enterprises were not only determined by and directed against a purely literary-philosophical tradition. They were also marked by their historical and cultural circumstances as 'immigrant' authors who adopted French as their language (one after a colonial imposition, the other as a literary and experiential choice), while they were immersed in the philosophical but also experiential questions and aporias of the

[4] This is a fear or even resentment in front of Joyce's omnivorous project described well by Derrida in 'Two Words for Joyce' (Derrida, 2013, 24). See also Katz (1999, 127).

French, European, and Western traditions that reached a crisis, and finally their nadir, with the Holocaust (see Salisbury, 2015, 9).

Seen in this context, Beckett's statements in the famous German letter to Axel Kaun of 1937 regarding, first English, and then language in general, reveal a preoccupation not only with his own developing aesthetic but also with an outdated tradition in need of revision, if not destruction. Or, as Beckett expressed it: 'it does not suffice if the game loses some of its sacred solemnity. It should stop' (Beckett, 2009, 520). Accordingly, what at first seems an artistic necessity, or even the personal impossibility to do something in an official, formal, or normal way, quickly reveals itself as an ethical imperative for any contemporary writer, a command to misuse language, until what sustains or lies below it – that is to say, its foundations or reason – comes through:

> It is indeed getting more and more difficult, even pointless, for me to write in *formal* [*offizielles*] English. And more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. *Grammar and style*! To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability [*Unerschüttlichkeit*] of a gentleman. A mask [*Larve*]. It is to be hoped the time will come, thank God, in some circles it already has, when language is best used where it is most efficiently abused. Since we cannot dismiss it all at once, at least we do not want to leave anything undone that may contribute to its disrepute. To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through – I cannot imagine a higher goal for today's writer. (Beckett, 2009, 513–14, 518; my emphasis)

By linking grammar and style with a Biedermeier swimsuit and with the imperturbability of a gentleman, Beckett is remarking here not only the conditions of officialness and propriety demanded by the cultural and literary traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He is also underlining the sphere of 'authenticity' as that which is 'naturally' dictated by cultural and, more significantly, biological origins (for example, it is *natural* for a writer to write in his own mother tongue, English). While this comment on contemporary culture could be seen as a Beckettian instantiation of the critique of the inauthenticity of being that Heidegger called *das Man* ('the "they"') (see Heidegger, 2008), Beckett's questioning of the modern subject will go further, since it will seek to erode not only authentic normality and officialness, but also the notion of authenticity or the proper itself in all spheres (see Katz, 1999, no. 6, 198).

As we know, such an examination of the authentic, the proper, and the natural, together with the concomitant dangers of their intertwining in the desire for full, sovereign presence and meaning, characterises Derrida's work from the start. Heidegger's *Destruktion* of metaphysics was a model (in conjunction with

other problematics, like the nature of the sign in Husserlian phenomenology, or the notion of origin in Rousseau) for Derrida's initial conception of deconstruction, as well as a constant reference in all of his subsequent work. Thus, given Derrida's continuous engagement with Heidegger's oeuvre, and Beckett's relation with the main champion of Heidegger in France during the war years, Jean Beaufret, and his mingling with the intellectual circles of *Les Temps modernes* where Heidegger's work was discussed, I agree with Rodney Sharkey's perception of Heidegger's work as a main connector between Beckett's and Derrida's oeuvres – especially when conceived as deconstructive struggles against fascism and the worst of Western culture (Sharkey, 2010, 411).

Derrida's philosophical and writerly investigation of this essential complicity between the desire for presence and for the authentic went through different stages and questions throughout his life. As we will see, these different stages have thematic and formal correspondences with Beckett's own developments, remarking thus different facets of their 'sympathetic vibration'. If their biggest coincidence is that, as Szafraniec puts it, they 'both deconstruct the self-present human subject' and 'institute the delay of self-presence as the source of the authorial "I"' (Szafraniec, 2007, 118), such an achievement is not a simple action, performed conceptually only once. In other words, this shared deconstruction and affirmation of deferral and difference involves a multiplicity of movements of decentring, deflection, and analysis, affecting not only the subject and its purported sovereignty, but also our languages, conceptions of origin, and the bodies through and in which we are born, live, speak, and die. Further, the 'sympathetic vibration' of their deconstruction affects not only the private, subjective experience of the writer and reader. By questioning some of the basic tenets of Western philosophy and thought (the teleology of discourse and life, the limits of the sovereign subject, the world, history, and of any delimited totality), their projects also examine and question – in different yet resonating performative manners – our collective ways of being, as well as the assumed naturally given conditions of thought, art, and expression. It is this multifaceted complexity of their critiques of Western cultures that drives the different angles of this Element, centred nevertheless on the encounter in the two oeuvres between the overpowering sovereign and the *khôratic* space where it/he rises and dies.

Given the complex intertwining of the questions of subject, language, and origin in their work, it is unsurprising that both Beckett and Derrida placed the mothers and the question of maternity and birth at the centre of their projects. As proof of this centrality, there is not only Beckett's famous affirmation to MacGreevy in 1937 – same year as the letter to Axel Kaun – saying: 'I am what her savage loving has made me' (Beckett, 2009, 552), or even Geoffrey Thompson's statement that the 'key to understanding Beckett [. . .] was to be

found in his relationship with his mother' (qtd in Knowlson, 1996, 172). More importantly, figures of May Beckett, as well as of other semi-anonymous mothers, constantly haunt Beckett's corpus, confirming his statement, from 1948 to Georges Duthuit, that, for his life and for his work, he might need no other eyes but his mother's:

> I keep watching my mother's eyes, never so blue, so stupefied, so heart-rending, eyes of an endless childhood, that of old age. Let us get there rather earlier, while there are still refusals we can make. I think these are the first eyes that I have seen. I have no wish to see any others, I have all I need for loving and weeping. I know now what is going to close, and open inside me, but without seeing anything, there is no more seeing. (Beckett, 2011, 92)

In the case of Derrida, as he expressed it in the most literary and personal text of his oeuvre, 'Circumfession', not only the figure of his mother, but also the temporal coincidence between her dying and his writing of this confessional text, becomes central. Linking himself to Saint Augustine, who also wrote through the mourning of his own mother (and a copy of whose *Confessions* remained in Beckett's library until the end), Derrida also considers the possibility, like Beckett, that his eyes – also weeping – could amalgamate with his mother's, and thus allow for a substitution of him for her, similar to Molloy's:[5]

> that child whom the grown-ups amused themselves by making cry for nothing, who was always to weep over himself with the tears of his mother: 'I'm sorry for myself', 'I make myself unhappy', 'I'm crying for myself', 'I'm crying over myself' – but like another, another wept over by another weeper, *I weep from my mother over the child whose substitute I am.* (Derrida and Bennington, 1993, 118–19; my emphasis)

Thus, with their writerly and deconstructive projects essentially linked to their own mothers, births, and notions of maternity, it is neither a coincidence nor just anecdotal evidence that Beckett's most important writerly 'revelation' – what will determine his own path and literary idiom of subtraction against Joyce's masterwork of addition – happened at his dying mother's room: 'Krapp's vision was on the pier at Dún Laoghaire; mine was in my mother's room. Make that clear once and for all' (qtd in Knowlson, 1996, 319).

If, as Jean-Michel Rabaté writes in *Beckett and Sade*, the biggest dream for an artist is to give birth to themselves, becoming their own creator (Rabaté, 2020, 40), or, as Angela Moorjani exclaims – following Ehrenzweig – 'the birthing process is the central myth of artistic creation' (Moorjani, 1982, 138), this dream, as Derrida pointed out in 'La veilleuse' (Derrida, 2013, 100), does not

[5] For a consideration of Beckett's relation to Augustinian 'autography', see H. Porter Abbott (1996).