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**Title:** Haze sole certitude : confusion and figure in Samuel Beckett's "Ill Seen Ill Said"

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**Citation style:** Masłoń Sławomir. (2008). Haze sole certitude : confusion and figure in Samuel Beckett's "Ill Seen Ill Said". W: P. Dziedzic, M. Nitka (red.), "Fire and ice : the dialectic of order and chaos" (S. 39-47). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.



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*Sławomir Masłoń*

## Haze Sole Certitude: Confusion and Figure in Samuel Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*

Samuel Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*,<sup>1</sup> the second of the three works which can be considered his second "trilogy" (the others being *Company*<sup>2</sup> and *Worstward Ho*<sup>3</sup>), presents us with the scene of seeing — we encounter the instrument of vision: "this filthy eye of flesh" (74) as well as "the other" one (64).<sup>4</sup> It sees a certain "she" in a certain landscape:

The cabin. [...] At the in-existent centre of a formless place. Rather more circular than otherwise finally. Flat to be sure. To cross it in a straight line takes her from five to ten minutes. [...] Stones increasingly abound. Ever scantier even the rankest weed. Meagre pastures hem it round on which it slowly gains. (58)

The two zones [stone and pasture] form a roughly circular whole. As though outlined by a trembling hand. Diameter. Careful. Say one furlong. On an average. Beyond the unknown. (59)

There is also a (grave?) stone to which she is at times drawn, sometimes there are ewes in the pasture, and constantly the twelve figures, in the familiar Beckettian long overcoats and block hats, who watch her from afar, always

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<sup>1</sup> First published in French as *Mal vu Mal dit* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1981) and then in the author's translation as *Ill Seen Ill Said* (London: John Calder, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> First published in English as *Company* (London: John Calder, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> First published in English as *Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> My quotations come from the collected edition: SAMUEL BECKETT, *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder, 1989); page numbers in the text.

from the same distance. These images keep fading, yet they always come back again.

The figure of a woman seems to be no more than an apparition — she comes and goes as she pleases:

With her right hand she holds the edge of the bowl. With her left the spoon dipped in the slop. So far so good. But before she can proceed she fades and disappears. Nothing now for the staring eye but the chair in its solitude. (78—79)

Although less “material” than objects (which are, nevertheless, imaginary ones), she is not within the controlling powers of the eye and, therefore, seems to be more than just a figment of imagination. If she appears balancing on the invisible line dividing presence from absence, then the question arises: which eye sees her — the eye of flesh or the other? But there is no knowing:

Already all confusion. Things and imaginings. As of always. Confusion amounting to nothing. Despite precautions. If only she could be pure figment. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else. Where no more precautions to be taken. No precautions possible. Cooped up there with the rest. Hovel and stones. The lot. And the eye. How simple all then. If only all could be pure figment. Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be. (67)

The reason why there is no knowing if she is inside or outside the skull lies in the fact that the eye, in its essence, is one, although doubled — the eye of flesh and the eye of mind are one and the same since no matter whether they use the sensible or the intelligible as their “raw materials,” they always make them into supposedly immutable figures (“Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be”), because they are the only “means” by which the eye can grasp anything. In this way, it is the eye that produces, “fictions” or, as the narrator would say, “poisons” both the real and the imagined — that is why the ideas of the outside and the inside seem to cease to mean much any more:

Such the confusion now between real and — how say its contrary? No matter. That old tandem. Such now the confusion between them once so twain. And such the farrago from eye to mind. For it to make what sad sense it may. No matter now. Such equal liars both. Real and — how ill say its contrary? The counter-poison. (82)

This confusion between the real and fiction may be said to add to our original hypothesis of the female figure as the apparition, since such a confusion is one of the crucial points Freud clearly emphasises when he tries to analyse the sources of the uncanny:

There is one more point of general application which I should like to add, though, strictly speaking, it has been included in what has already been said about animism and modes of working of the mental apparatus that have been surmounted; for I think it deserves special emphasis. This is that an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between the imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

We could also add that one of the other things Freud mentions as the sources of the uncanny is repetition in diverse forms: as the recurrence of the same thing, as the returning of the repressed affects or as the compulsion to repeat.<sup>6</sup> Without delving too much into the psychological side of psychoanalysis, we can only notice in passing that repetition is definitely one of the basic structural motifs of *Ill Seen Ill Said* (and the whole trilogy). However, what interests us more here is the relationship between the uncanny scene as it is seen and the scopic as such.

Since, as demonstrated by Freud, a given situation is perceived as uncanny when the confusion between the real and the imaginary arises, the scene of the uncanny must be the region in which the eye loses the hold of what it actually sees or does not see. But such a position is not the position of knowledge, what is perceived is uncertain and questionable — the uncanny destabilises, defamiliarises perception of the phenomenal and especially the scopic. We can say, therefore, that what seems to be missing in the uncanny is precisely what Plato would call an idea, that is to say, the “forms,” that which brings the phenomenal under the aegis of knowledge, that which schematises and, therefore, establishes the real.

But, obviously, it is not the missing idea that is re-presented as the old woman, neither is she the missing *of* the idea. The appearance of the apparition accomplishes a much more subtle sleight of hand. Because she is co-existent with the confusion between the fictive and the non-fictive, it is impossible to establish whether she *originates from* the confusion or is the *originator of* it.

Presence is a double “phenomenon” — it is *at once* the presence of the object of consciousness to consciousness (reason, self, mind’s eye — whatever we call it), and the presence of consciousness to itself. The present object of consciousness is necessarily ideal, since, in order to appear in consciousness (in order to present itself), it has to be rid of all empirical diversity — it has to be identical with itself as the same. And it is precisely the very ideality of such an

<sup>5</sup> SIGMUND FREUD, “The Uncanny,” in: *Art and Literature*, ed. ALBERT DICKSON (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 367.

<sup>6</sup> FREUD, “The Uncanny,” pp. 258—261.

object that makes possible its being infinitely repeated as re-presented as the image of the immutable same. If this is the case, then we can say that the sensible re-presentation is the return of the pre-expressive presentation of the ideal object of consciousness. But there is a logical flaw in this understanding of representation (although such an understanding is the history of metaphysics) — the very possibility of the return of presentation as re-presentation is what makes presentation as such impossible: re-presentation would not be possible, if presentation did not already allow its own absence. That is to say, the repetition of the same of presentation would be out of the question, if this same were not originally other than itself.<sup>7</sup> The above would therefore bring us to the conclusion that it is not the same which is the matrix for repetition or re-presentation, but that it is precisely repetition or the split origin of the same that produces the same — that, originally, the same is always other to itself. What is more, this primal differing from itself is obviously also the point where the originary deferring<sup>8</sup> takes place, as the identity of the object is always deferred in the chain of representations the object is. (The object is always already a representation, a repetition which can lead only to another repetition.) Therefore, the originary repetition is also the site where time and space originate, but *not as presence* — if time meant just presence, if the source of time were not already split, if time did not originally defer itself, if it were identical with itself, time would already be still-born at its very source, or, in other words, there would be neither time nor space since there could not be any difference between the points of time or space. Thus the origin of consciousness is split, is always already repeated. In terms of our discussion, this means that, since it is always at once present and absent, it can never be stabilised enough to be seen (as either present or absent) and, therefore, it can never be made into a figure; moreover, for the very reason that the split is anterior to consciousness, or, rather, that it is what produces consciousness, it is irrecoverable for consciousness — the subject cannot see (theorise, figure) its own conception.

We can say that every figure is a repetition, but the figure-as-repetition is itself the product of the repetition which is not itself a figure, but which originates figuration. Having no perceptible or intelligible source, the figure of the woman in *Ill Seen Ill Said* allows the missing (originary) repetition, on the basis of which the repetition of the figure of the woman is possible, to “appear” — but in its missing: the woman is neither present nor absent. As, in another context, Lacoue-Labarthe says:

<sup>7</sup> THOMAS TREZISE, *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 19–20.

<sup>8</sup> JACQUES DERRIDA, “Différance,” in: *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. ALAN BASS (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982).

The absence of that on the basis of which there is imitation, the absence of the imitated or the repeated [...] [in our case it is the absence of the idea, the absence of the consolidated object of sight] reveals what is by definition unrevealable — imitation or repetition. In general, nothing could appear, arise or be revealed, “occur,” were it not for repetition. The absence of repetition, by consequence, reveals only the unrevealable, gives rise only to the improbable, and throws off the perceived and well-known.<sup>9</sup>

That is precisely why the confusion of imaginings and things about which Beckett speaks is “[c]onfusion amounting to nothing” — what comes to the surface here is the very movement of figuration or *the mimetic itself*; therefore, what takes place is strictly speaking *no-thing*: the uncanny as the “phenomenon” in all its purity.

This no-thing, although temporarily “gathered round” the vague figure of the woman, is nevertheless that which cannot appear as such on the scene of seeing. The eye that tries to see this invisible/unintelligible has to focus on the figure in order to make it distinct, to make it stand out from the ground, but what it encounters in the process is only more confusion, more haze — this is what is “revealed” when, rather than look at the reflected light, one looks at the sun: light in its might, light that effaces all figures:

She is vanishing. With the rest. The already ill seen bedimmed and ill seen again annulled. The mind betrays the treacherous eyes and the treacherous word their treacheries. Haze sole certitude. The same that reigns beyond the pastures. It gains them already. It will gain the zone of stones. Then the dwelling through all its chinks. The eye will close in vain. To see but haze. Not even. Be itself but haze. How can it ever be said? Quick how ever ill said before it submerges all. Light. In one treacherous word. Dazzling haze. Light in its might at last. Where no more to be seen. To be said. (88)

What cannot be seen as the object is that which allows the seeing of the object, that is to say, light. However, “not the light that appears (*lumen*) by clinging to surfaces, but the light that flashes (*lux*) and that causes to appear, itself nonapparent as such. *Lux* without *fiat*, having neither creator, subject, nor source, being the source but in itself refracted, in itself radiant, exploding, broken.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in order to erase itself — to erase itself as the very figure of seeing — the eye not only has to annihilate what is seen (seeing nothing but haze it would still see itself seeing) but it has to *become* the haze, that is to say,

<sup>9</sup> PHILIPPE LACOUÉ-LABARTHE, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. CHRISTOPHER FYNISK (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 195.

<sup>10</sup> JEAN-LUC NANCY, *The Muses*, trans. PEGGY KAMUF (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 33.

annihilate itself as seeing. In this way, what cannot be figured, the mimetic, is made by Beckett into a relationship of figures: both figures (the woman and the eye) are put on the scene only to efface one another — what we are left with is the inexplicable state of confusion. We are given a figure, but one that is not a figure of knowledge. What is figured in it is something vague and monstrous that cannot be turned into a meaning — it does not explain anything, on the contrary, it is the figure of confusion whose sole function is to bar the production of meaning.

The absolute evacuation of the scene is, however, only the *dream* of the eye that keeps reappearing throughout the text. To quote but one more example:

Let her vanish. And the rest. For good. And the sun. Last rays. And the moon. And Venus. Nothing left but black sky. White earth. Or inversely. No more sky or earth. Finished high and low. Nothing but black and white. Everywhere no matter where. But black. Void. Nothing else. Contemplate that. Not another word. Home at last. Gently gently. (75)

Yet, the next paragraph starts: “Panic past pass on. The hands. Seen from above. They rest on the pubis intertwined,” and on continues the description of the scene of seeing. Similarly, the end of *Ill Seen Ill Said* is only such a panic:

First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle. Not another crumb of carrion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness. (97)

Yet, *no* happiness awaits. The reason for this lies in that mimesis is its own *movement* among forms/figures that are not pre-mimetic but that arise from it (repetition, *mimesis* are originary). Although the mimetic does not usually present itself but remains the “ground” against which figures appear, as we have already seen, it is possible in writing, with some ingenuity, to turn this ground into a figure, but it is a figure *that is not an image*, it is a “second degree” figure, a figure of the absence of figure, and therefore a figure of the strange(r). Yet, such figuring is possible only with the help of a figure (of the woman, of the scene of seeing, etc.) that is effaced in the process of turning the ground of this figure into a figure. Therefore, the effaced figure always *remains within the ground turned into a figure, precisely in the position of being its ground* — after the process of effacing wipes out all the sensible/intelligible from the figure, it remains as the vestige, pure difference, trace, or, to be more precise, *the very tracing of the trace* (the movement of mimesis). Thus, we can say that there is no ground *as such* or that the only “ground” for all figures lies in their differences — in the process of production, that is to say, repetition, a figure

can always become a ground for its ground and, by these means, turn its ground into a figure. Yet, because the figuration described here cannot be turned into a homogenous image, such a “ground” or trace is *never one*, it is the multiplicity of grounds and figures that has its already refracted source in the originary repetition — what we are used to call *mimesis* is, in its essence, a *heterogenesis*.<sup>11</sup> This is precisely what the eye dreads (if it is dread), but from which it can never escape:

Absence supreme good and yet. Illumination then go again and on return no more trace. On earth’s face. Of what was never. And if by mishap some left then go again. For good again. So on. Till no more trace. On earth’s face. Instead of always the same place. Slaving away forever in the same place. At this and that trace. And what if the eye could not? No more tear itself away from the remains of trace. Of what was never. (96)

The eye cannot. No happiness to know then.

But, leaving aside for a while the matters of *mimesis* and figuration, there is also one more question that remains to be asked here: is the sex (if it is sex) of the apparition a matter of accident? Although the figure of the woman does not immediately reveal the unrevealable, that is, the monstrous, nevertheless, in the final analysis, it becomes the site of its support within the region of the visible. Is there anything feminine (which, in such a situation, would also have to mean inhuman) in this kind of monstration? We do not have to search very far to find clues. The one at hand, and famous, is aphorism 361 of *The Gay Science*:

Falseness with a good conscience; the delight in simulation exploding as a power that pushes aside one’s so-called “character,” flooding it and at times extinguishing it; the inner craving for a role and mask, for *appearance*; an excess of the capacity for all kinds of adaptations that can no longer be satisfied in the service of the most immediate and narrowest utility — all of this is perhaps not only peculiar to the actor?<sup>12</sup>

The creatures Nietzsche has in mind are all those who can be rumoured not to display or possess any stable property, all those who are perceived as the ones who present themselves as what they are not, the “human agents” that can become everyone but who are, in themselves, no one — without “character,” without proper “interior.” This “lack of qualities” is characteristic (in the aphorism) not only of the actor but also of two other paradigmatic figures of

<sup>11</sup> NANCY, *The Muses*, pp. 24–26.

<sup>12</sup> FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*, trans. WALTER KAUFMANN (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 316.



the western civilisation: the Jew and the woman. It is in them that pure mimeticism finds its impersonation — they are the perfect mimeticians whose dissimulating proficiencies are guaranteed by their missing content. The woman — and here Nietzsche is, of course, only the mouthpiece of a long tradition of representing *the* woman — does not resemble herself but always already masks herself, it is her very essence: she is a perpetual flight from herself. Although she is “somebody,” her being just an empty form of identity does not let her be identified or recognised. Being thus a perfect figure of nobody, she is the immaculately faceless image: “*no one — in person,*”<sup>13</sup> monstrous and uncanny.

<sup>13</sup> LACOUÉ-LABARTHE, *Typography ...*, p. 119.

Sławomir Masłoń

Mgła to jedyna pewność: zamęt i figura  
w *Źle widziane źle powiedziane* Samuela Becketta

#### Streszczenie

Autor próbuje pokazać, jak poprzez skomplikowane operowanie obrazami oka, mgły, sceny widzenia i tego, co jest widziane, Beckett stwarza matrycę ruchu, który wytwarza figury, gdzie to, co nie da się przedstawić (mimetyczność jako taka), przybiera postać relacji między figurami, zacierającymi jedna drugą, to znaczy wytwarzającymi „zamęt”, który jednak sam nie może uniknąć stania się figurą. Ponieważ zatarcie takie jest możliwe tylko za pomocą jakiejś figury (widzianej kobiety, sceny widzenia itp.), która ulega wymazaniu lub, mówiąc inaczej, zniszczeniu w procesie przekształcania tła tej figury w figurę, wymazana figura zawsze pozostaje obecna w tle przekształconym w figurę właśnie jako jej tło — po tym jak proces wymazywania usuwa wszystko, co zmysłowe/rozumowe z figury, pozostaje ona jako resztką, czysta różnica, ślad, czy też, ujmując rzecz bardziej precyzyjnie, jako samo odciskanie się śladu (ruch *mimesis*). Stąd też możemy powiedzieć, że nie istnieje tu tło jako takie, a także to, że jedynym „tłem” wszystkich figur są zachodzące między nimi różnice — w procesie wytwarzania, czyli nieskończonego powtórzenia (czyim innym jest literatura?), figura zawsze może się stać tłem swego tła, aby w ten sposób przekształcić owo tło w figurę.

Slawomir Masłoń

Der Nebel ist eine einzige Sicherheit: Chaos und Figur  
im Samuel Becketts Werk *Nicht gern gesehen falsch gesagt*

Zusammenfassung

Der Verfasser versucht zu zeigen, wie Beckett die Bilder des Auges, des Nebels, der Wahrnehmungsbühne und dessen was gesehen ist benutzend Figuren erzeugt, wo alles was nicht vorstellbar ist (Mimese als solche) als eine Relation zwischen den Figuren erscheint, die gegenseitig verblappend ein Chaos hervorrufen, das aber nicht davonkommen kann, selbst eine Figur zu werden. Da solch ein Verblappen nur mittels einer Figur möglich ist (die gesehene Frau, die Wahrnehmungsbühne u. dgl.), die entfernt wird oder anders gesagt im Prozess des Figurwerdens zerstört wird, bleibt die entfernte Figur immer in dem in eine Figur verwandelten Hintergrund als deren Hintergrund — nachdem alles Sinnliche/Verstandesmäßige aus der Figur entfernt worden ist, wird diese Figur zu einem Rest, reinem Unterschied, einer Spur oder genauer gesagt zum Spurbinterlassen selbst (*Mimesis*-Bewegung). So kann man sagen, dass es hier keinen Hintergrund *sensu stricto* mehr gibt und als einziger „Hintergrund“ für alle Figuren gelten die zwischen ihnen auftretenden Unterschiede — im Erzeugungsprozess, also durch endloses Wiederholen (was anderes ist die Literatur eigentlich?), kann eine Figur immer zum Hintergrund ihres eigenen Hintergrunds werden, um auf diese Weise den Hintergrund in eine Figur verwandeln.