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**AN ATTEMPT AT
A PHONOSEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF
SAMUEL BECKETT'S *STIRRINGS STILL***

It seems that critical attention has been focused too much on the psychological and philosophical dimensions of Samuel Beckett's prose, while its intricate and rigorous artistic ordering, manifest especially in his late short fiction, has not received its due recognition. Taking as an example *Stirrings Still*, it becomes evident upon closer scrutiny that it displays many features of a poetic text. These striking features comprise rhythmic regularity of passages, dense patterning of verbal material, suggestiveness and polysemy. Consequently, any analysis of the text's meaning should proceed from its phonological and lexical patterns, but in the case of *Stirrings Still* it must be stated that although Beckett's text invites and requires interpretative effort, at the same time it tantalizingly resists the clarification of its meaning. The notion of "clarification" has been introduced by Antoine Berman to explain one of the deforming tendencies that occur during literary translation process. According to Berman, clarification particularly concerns the level of "clarity" perceptible in words and their meanings: where the original has no problem moving in the indefinite, the literary language of the translation tends to impose the definite (289). Clarification, as Berman argues, aims to render "clear" what does not

wish to be clear in the original; the movement from polysemy to monosemy is one mode of clarification, while paraphrasing in translation is another (289). These remarks seem especially pertinent in the context of critical attempts to explicate the deliberately ambiguous, elliptical and oblique late fiction of Beckett.

In *Stirrings Still* rich verbal patterning on the phonological level, manifesting itself in alliteration, repetition, parallelism, and rhythmic organization, foregrounds the phonetic element as an entity in its own right. Proper response to the resulting visibility of sound, as one might call it, requires "overriding the normal procedures of language whereby the sound functions, in Saussure's vocabulary, entirely as a differential entity and not as a positive term" (Attridge 1124). The visibility of sound obstructs the ordinary process of receiving information conveyed by a spoken or written utterance. This process is referred to in cognitive linguistics as "phonetic coding". According to Reuven Tsur, phonetic coding consists in substituting an abstract phonetic category for the acoustic information that is transmitted, and the message, reduced purely to its content, divorced from the sounds that carry it, is passed through strings of abstract phonetic categories (57). The pre-categorical acoustic information that carries these categories is normally disregarded or shut out of consciousness, but as Tsur points out, "rhyme delays the special process that strips away all auditory information" (58). Rhyme represents just one particular instance of rich phonetic patterning, which can achieve the same effect, namely that of bringing to immediate perception various acoustic events.

A similar strategy of foregrounding the sound dimension seems at work in Beckett's text and the present article contends that *Stirrings Still*, though written in prose, by virtue of its organization of the linguistic material moves into the realm of poetry. It is logical then to adopt an appropriate method of investigating its poetic ordering. A useful model of analysis is proposed by Andrzej Zgorzelski, who himself has called his approach "phonosemantic". It is, as Zgorzelski puts it, "an analysis of poetry which attempts to view indi-

vidual poems as sound-and-sense structures," and structure "is understood here as a complicated network of relations - in a poem the network of sound patterns, stress regularities, compositional divisions and syntactical linguistic units" ("Sound and Sense" 335). He calls this method "phonosemantic" because it duly recognizes that sound phenomena "are - for a given utterance - the only possible ways to express the poem's message" and "sound elements have both semantic and semiotic functions in the creation of the text's meaning" ("Sound and Sense" 336).

Beckett's short prose work *Stirrings Still* seems to be governed by the lyrical mode, which is revealed not only by the poetic organization of the linguistic material, but also by the dominant mechanism of creating meaning - indirectly, through implication. Indirection, suggestion and implication are, as Zgorzelski elsewhere observes, "the methods of lyrical expressing, in contradistinction to the epical telling, which proceeds in the categories of direct and simple denotation, or quasi-denotation" ("Syncretic nature" 166-7). Texts governed by the lyrical mode are thus unique sound and sense structures, in which these two dimensions, semantics and sonority, are inextricably bound with each other, and the extent to which Beckett's work exploits the characteristic strategies of a poetic utterance is signaled already by its title *Stirrings Still*. The pairing of words that share initial consonant cluster ST, hence sound alike but have opposite meanings, is an instance of the device called by Roman Jakobson "paronomasia". Paronomasia exploits sonic similarity to suggest semantic similarity or contrast. As Jakobson points out, "In a sequence, where similarity is superimposed on contiguity, two similar phonemic sequences near to each other are prone to assume a paronomastic function. Words similar in sound are drawn together in meaning" (48). Thus paronomasia binds semantically words that are close phonetically and establishes relations that contribute to the unique sound and sense organization of a literary text.

In the title of Beckett's work paronomasia exploits the similarity of sound between "stir" and "still" to emphasize the

semantic contrast between their lexical meaning, between movement and life on one hand, and stasis and death, on the other hand, the contrast delivered here by the opposition of two phonemes: ST.R versus ST.L. However, the second meaning of "still," with its connotations of duration and persistence, gives another twist to the phrase rendering its meaning as "persistent and continuous movement". There is also the third meaning of "still," "in spite of everything," which further complicates the meaning of the phrase "stirrings still," endowing it with some heroic undertones.

The paronomastic chain generated by the configurations of the consonants L, R, S and T surfaces in the fourth paragraph in the two phrases: "at rest after all they [the hands] did" and "to rest it [his head] too". "Rest" contains the pattern of three consonants, R.ST, which obviously connects it with "stirrings" from the title, but on the semantic level "rest" is closely associated with "still," which clearly brings out the principle of paronomasia as exploring both similarity and contrast in meaning. The lexical network composed of "stir," "still," and "rest" becomes enriched by the incorporation of two words that emphasize the mental condition of Beckett's unnamed protagonist, namely "lost" and "solitude," based on the variations of the crucial consonants, L, S and T, which occur in the phrase "his solitude as lost to suffering he sat at his table" (Beckett 16).

The consonantal cluster ST, signaling the crucial network of signification initiated by "stirrings still" from the title, recurs in the final two paragraphs of the text. The first instance is found in the phrase "stop dead and stand stock still". It is built on the striking alliterative sequence, which establishes equivalence between the verbs indicating the absence of movement, "stop" and "stand stock still," and the adjacent adjective "dead," the paronomastic bond between them fastened by the common ending of "stand" and "dead". Furthermore, the verb "stayed," referring to the position of Beckett's character at the beginning of the final paragraph, is not only semantically related to the verb "stood"; the two lexical units share the initial consonants S and T. In addi-

tion, through the final consonant D, both verbs, "stand" and stayed," echo the key adjective "dead". The central paronomasia recurs in the phrase "stir no more" repeated twice in the final section¹.

Another notable example not merely of alliteration, but of a richer sonic similarity, involves the phrase "remains of reason," based on the consonantal patterns R.N.Z and R.Z.N, and enclosed by "bring" and "bear," sharing the consonants B and R: "bring what is more his remains of reason to bear". A striking variation on this pattern is found in "Bringing to bear on all this his remains of reason". Also, the leitmotif of the final paragraph - "So on unknowing and no end in sight" - is the phrase richly orchestrated with the patterns of the consonants S, N, and the diphthong /eu/.

In addition to the phonetic orchestration and paronomasia, the poetic quality of *Stirrings Still* is enhanced by frequent rhythmic regularity of its passages. The first striking example involves the elliptical sentence in the second paragraph, the sentence which easily lends itself to verse division:

**So again and again
disappeared again
only to reappear again
at another place again. (9)**

The passage epitomizes the idea of discrete, discontinuous movement, indicated only by the change of place, reveals its rhythmic regularity. It is broken down into four verse-like units containing two stressed syllables (the first two lines) and three stressed syllables (the third and the fourth line). In addition, the recurrence of "again" in the fixed position marking here the end of each line provides a closure and enhances the rhythmic quality of the passage. The very repetition of the word "again" (five times) as well as its final position underscores its lexical meaning. Thus the passage is governed by the iconic principle, which results from the correspondence, "diagrammatic resemblance" between

¹ This is a Shakespearean echo, as Brater points out, an allusion to the dirge from *Cymbeline*: "Fear no more the heat o'th' sun" (Brater 154).

the organization of the verbal material and the concept of cyclical return. The "iconic mode" of signification is understood in its basic sense as the one in which the signifier is perceived as *resembling* in some aspect the signified (Nanny and Fischer). The achieved effect is not only that of poetic heightening. The patterning of the linguistic material in the passage reveals its semantic function, iconically illustrating the concept embodied in "again". The phrase "another place," which by virtue of its association with "again" carries the suggestion of recurrence and cyclical rhythm, is juxtaposed with "the same place and table," which by contrast, implies the idea of sameness and stasis, the absence of rhythm. In addition, the phrase "same place and table" /selm plels 'n teibel/ is a sequence composed of words sharing the same vocalic nucleus /ei/, and its repetition iconically conveys the idea of sameness.

Like a refrain or leitmotif, "again" recurs in another highly organized passage in the third paragraph, which can be easily divided into three distiches:

**Till so many strokes and cries since he was last seen
that perhaps he would not be seen again.
Then so many cries since the strokes were last heard
that perhaps they *would* not be heard again.
Then such silence since the cries were last heard
that perhaps even they would not be heard again. (13)**

The passage is built on striking parallelisms and repetitions, displaying also a clear rhythmic pattern. In addition, it is heavily orchestrated with the consonants S and N, culminating in the sequence "such silence since," where "silence" and "since" besides the alliterated S share the same final consonant cluster NS. The recurring combination of the negative particle "not" and "again" suggests the termination of the

cycle, thus contradicting the idea of the previously **analyzed** passage based on the heavily foregrounded "again". The juxtaposition of the two passages underscores the opposition between "again" and "not again". The opposition "again or not

again" seems to be Beckett's version of Hamlet's

dilemma "to be or not to be". It encapsulates the crucial distinction drawn in the text between "the end which is no more than a mere lull," a temporary cessation of things, and "the one true end to time and grief and self". The cyclical pattern of collapse and restoration, destruction and restitution, "disappear and reappear again," becomes thus the anticipation of the irreversible and total annihilation, "disappear and not reappear again".

In addition to the phonological and rhythmic patterning, in *Stirrings Still* the insistent deployment of repetition and parallelism results in its meticulous ordering also on the level of syntactical and linguistic units. Words and phrases form the underlying network of signification, the network which involves focusing motifs that carry the main semantic thrust of the story. The compositional division of the text into paragraphs and the recurrence of unifying motifs correspond to the stanzaic construction of a poem and the use of the refrain. The focusing element of the first paragraph is the unchanging light coming from the window. As the narrator explains, it replaces the light "from the days and nights when day followed hard on night and night on day"; "the faint unchanging light" makes the distinction between night and day impossible, and the impossibility of differentiating between day and night is already hinted at in the second sentence: "One night or day". If one cannot tell day from night, then one cannot orient oneself in the passage of time, so the result is not only the blurring of the fundamental dichotomy between night and day, and light and dark, but also temporal disorientation, the confusion of the mind trying to grapple with the flow of time and with the external reality, as suggested by image of the unnamed protagonist mounting the stool and watching "through the clouded pane the cloudless sky".

The efforts of the man concentrate on reaching the external world, "seeking the way out of the dark". He is left in the dark because the outer light, "the faint unchanging light," went out. The narrative description plays on the ambiguity of the phrase "to be in the dark," activating its idiomatic meaning: "to be ignorant," "to lack knowledge". And on the epis-

temological level, the image of the man sitting in his room in the dark and "seeking the way out" is the metaphor of the cognitive process of the mind trying to achieve some grasp on reality, to establish some fundamental distinctions. A possibility of cognizing the external reality, or at least of measuring its temporal aspect, arises thanks to the clock striking the hours and half-hours, and the cries coming from the outside, too. The strokes of the clock and the cries, "now faint now clear," establish a rhythm; the changing level of their clarity or loudness is the only indication of change. But one may suspect that the distinction "now faint now clear" ultimately is a fake one, just as the distinction applied to the otherwise identical ticking of the clock, tick-tack, as the means of establishing a fundamental rhythm of existence, indicating a difference and thus the flow of time.

The recurring "strokes" and "cries" function in the text as leitmotifs, gathering to themselves a wealth of meanings. They are the only signs of the external reality, of the spatio-temporal realm with respect to which the protagonist orients himself. "The strokes" represent here the metonymy of time, whereas "the cries" as expressions of grief point, index-like, to life. Hence the reiterated phrase "the strokes and cries" acquires the meaning of the passing of time and the crying of people, the temporal process of living and suffering, in effect becoming the metonymy of the human condition. Living means suffering since "cries" are the only symptoms of life heard by the unnamed protagonist of Beckett's story.

However, the "strokes and cries" not only seem to map out the external reality, but serve as important markers of movement and change as well. Movement in the fictional reality of *Stirrings Still* depends here on disappearing in one place and reappearing in another place, a different one: "Disappear and reappear at another place. Disappear again and reappear again at another place again. Or at the same. Nothing to show not the same" (12). But if one cannot tell whether one appears in the same place or another, since there is nothing to show the distinction, "nothing to show not the same," then

the whole idea of movement and its function as the determinant of space collapse.

The same indeterminacy is extended to the flow of time, where the very possibility of distinguishing one moment from another becomes questioned. The two dimensions, spatial and temporal, are conflated in the concept of "where never," established in the text as the shorthand for the spatio-temporal continuum or rather as its negation (also because movement and time are presented as discrete, discontinuous). As a new semantic unit, "where never" phonetically resembles "whenever" and "wherever," it comes across as their phonetic concatenation, but on the semantic level it yields the negation of both, because the meaning of "where never" comprises the opposite of "wherever" and the opposite of "whenever," thus it stands for "nowhere and never". And with this near-impossibility of any spatio-temporal determination, of any measure of change, the only markers on which the protagonist can rely are "the strokes" and "the cries": "Disappear and reappear in another where never. Nothing to show not another where never. Nothing but the strokes. The cries" (13).

The "strokes" and the "cries" unify the inner world, the protagonist's room, and the external world. And his final emerging into the outer world stands in the implied contrast with his previous condition, the confinement in the room, logically corresponding to being locked in one's subjectivity. As the narrator puts it, he emerged into the outer world "in the guise of a more or less reasonable being" (15). The protagonist now as a rational being starts to wonder if he is in his right mind because, to his alarm, he realizes that there is no distinction between his previous condition ("inside his room, within its four walls") and the outside. This lack of distinction between the inner and the outer world is indicated by the fact that the "strokes of the clock," the only perceptible indicators of reality, are "no clearer now". They sound the same, while they should be louder than "when in principle muffled by his four walls". The same is true of the other sound, of the "cries," ironically called "sole enlivener of his solitude" (only signs of grief bring life to his solitary condition). Fur-

thermore, the origin of the sounds, too, is just as mysterious as it was during the time of his confinement within the four walls of his room. Where the strokes and cries come from is as impossible to determine as it was when he was inside his room: "Of their whenceabouts that is of clock and cries the same was true that is no more to be determined now than as was only natural then" (16). Gradually all points of distinction between the indoors and the outdoors, between the inner world and the external world become obliterated. The two realms prove to be indistinguishable, and the resulting epistemological confusion carries horrifying ontological implications, suggesting the solipsistic vision of a mind that only dreams about reality external to it.

The sense of hearing as a means of orienting oneself in space proves futile: "So all ears from bad to worse till in the end he ceased if not to hear to listen and set out to look about him" (17). His subsequent attempt to rely on sight is equally frustrating, he cannot determine the limits of the field in which he stands. There are no customary boundaries which determine space, no "fence or other manner of bourne from which to return"². In addition, "sameness of grass" suggests no differentiation between here and there, there is no center and periphery either. There is nothing to indicate his position in space. If the sense of hearing establishes the succession of events, then it is intimately related to the perception of time, while the sense of sight delineates space. The two dimensions of time and space, so insistently evoked in the text by the recurrent motifs and metonymies, distinctly recall Kant's epistemology and his argument that space and time are but modes of cognition, mental categories ordering reality, and they do not belong to "things in themselves," which subsist outside time and space (Kant).

If we adopt Kant's epistemological scheme, his division into two realms: the realm of appearances, of things as they are mediated by the senses and represented to conscious-

² Brater notices here, in the phrase "other manner of bourne," the allusion to death, from Hamlet's famous soliloquy: "The undiscover'd country from whose bourn No traveller returns".

ness, and the realm of "things in themselves," then in Beckett's *Stirrings Still*, the room in which the protagonist is initially located, the indoors, would correspond to the realm of sensory experience, to his mind, that is subjectivity, whereas the outer world would stand for the world of things in themselves, objectivity. After the poignant failure to determine his spatio-temporal position with the use of hearing and sight, the protagonist's last resort is reflection: "So all eyes from bad to worse till in the end he ceased if not to look (about him or more closely) and set out to take thought" (18). This reliance on the rational faculty recalls Kantian dictum on the role of the intellect: "the understanding intuits nothing, but only reflects" (Kant 38). This stage of reflection comes after the process of perception, which is prior to it. In Beckett's story the protagonist brings to bear on his epistemological predicament "his remains of reason," he seeks help in thought, in reflection, but reasoning is useless. His memory, measuring his present against the remembered past, is of no use either. Futility of reasoning causes him to move on, "resigned to unknowing". He has one wish only - that the strokes and the cries would cease for good.

The conflation of inner and outer reality is finally confirmed by the sound of "that missing word," which paradoxically comes to his ears "from deep within". It is a word, or rather the tantalizing, elusive acoustic specter of a word whose meaning eludes the protagonist. Whatever its meaning may be, its effect is "to end where never till then". The phrase expresses the dissolution of the temporal and spatial construction of reality by the mind, and of the self as well. The futility of categorizing, of giving names to things as one aspect of mapping out reality, is underscored by the emphatic repetition of "so-called": "his mind so-called" and "self so-called". Names are arbitrary, man-made. Things are only "so-called," hence they are only mental concepts, divorced from reality, which is unknowable. The hubbub in the protagonist's mind drowns the word, which grows fainter and fainter, and its meaning is not revealed. Whatever promise or threat it carried, it is irretrievably lost. The only solution

to the predicament is "all to end": "No matter how no matter where. Time and grief and self-so-called. Oh all to end" (22).

The presented phonosemantic analysis of *Stirrings Stills*, in keeping with its basic methodological principle, has given due attention to the sound dimension and the verbal patterning of the text, treating Beckett's fictional prose work as a self-contained poetic utterance whose meaning is encoded in the relations between its constituent elements. As such it stands in clear contrast to the approach taken by Andrew Renton in his essay "Disabled Figures: From the *Residua* to *Stirrings Still*," where he argues that *Stirrings Still* is less a continuous text and more a series of texts which attempt to rewrite each other in turn, texts that are "almost entirely composed of echoes and reiterations of his previous work" (172). While this claim may well be valid, it was nevertheless believed that valuable insights into Beckett's enigmatic text could be gained by attending to the organization of its linguistic material alone. In *Stirrings Still*, just like in a poetic text governed by the lyrical dominant, the foregrounding of the phonetic element and the concomitant paronomasia and iconicity, the underlying network of signification created by lexical repetitions, verbal echoes and focusing motifs, all contribute to the overall meaning of the text. However, this meaning, created largely by implication and suggestion, can never be fixed and grasped in its entirety. By virtue of its pervasive ambiguity, polysemy and ellipsis Beckett's text defies "clarification," it successfully resists rash critical attempts to reduce it to some paraphrasable content, forever inviting and frustrating interpretative efforts.

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