

The Totemic Double¹:
A Study of Samuel Beckett's *A Piece of Monologue*

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Introduction

*A Piece of Monologue*² begins with a paradoxical statement about time: "Birth was the death of him" (425). Words and images associated with birth and death are spread throughout the text. The structure of the play that depicts the end from the very beginning corresponds closely to the idea of Beckett that birth is the beginning of dying. A few lines after the opening speech, there is "Ghastly grinning ever since" (425). Beckett here is describing newborn infancy, but this phrase would be said more appropriately of a corpse's skull than of a child, as Kristin Morrison points out. The phrase is followed by "Up at the lid to come. In cradle and crib" (425) implying that, even as a baby, the man anticipates his death, represented by the lid of the coffin that is "to come" in the near future (Morrison 350). Though they are opposed to each other, birth and death, and cradle and coffin, are linked together in an expression. They are states of being opposite to each other in one person.

Besides, there are also many other contrasts in the play: east and west, matches and a spill,³ white faint light and black darkness, past and present, windows and a wall. The stage production of the play gives us another contrasted image, vertical and hori-

zontal – the speaker and an oil lamp, and a white bed. The speaker, probably seventy-nine or eighty-two,⁴ tells the story of a man so much like himself that it is clear he is simply speaking of himself in the third person. But, narrating the story, this old man seems unable to face himself because he always uses “he”, never saying “I”. On a stage covered with gloom, the white-haired speaker with a white nightgown and white socks is at the “same level, same height” as the standard lamp with a “skull-sized globe” (425) emitting faintly white light. These two, the man and the lamp, separated by two meters, stand vertically and static throughout the play except for the movement of the speaker’s lips in narration. Mel Gussow aptly reviewed the production as follows: “the speaker has a silent, totemic double, a tall standing lamp with a skull-size white globe. Any second we expect the lamp to speak” (Gussow 157). Although only one of them is a living person, they so strikingly resemble each other that it sounds like the speaker is speaking of his mirror image, since each has a white head and a white trunk and is standing upright. Their resemblance contributes the effect of confusing who is the actual speaker. Moreover, though the speaker never moves till the end, the narrated man is described as moving about constantly. So, while looking at the speaker and the lamp, and hearing a ceaseless monologue delivered by a single character, the speaker, spectators experience visual and auditory hallucinations, subtly blurring the boundary between the actual man before their eyes and the visions he has in his mind.

The intention of this present paper is to analyze the structure of *A Piece of Monologue* by examining the contrasted expressions mentioned above. For that purpose, before considering the text of the play only for performance, we must examine it as a written text, although it runs to only five pages in length.⁵ It is a complicatedly woven text whose skillful use of words requires to be analyzed carefully. The following discussion will largely center on the contrasted expressions repeatedly narrated by the speaker, particularly on these words: matches and a spill, and windows and a wall. Repeatedly narrated, they gradually come to be expressed with slight variations in each line. Then, the close examination of the written text will make clear how the repetitions and differences have effects on us, interacting and echoing with each line. As a result, we will see the white standard lamp as the speaker’s “totemic double”, his dual image that not only reflects the workings of the speaker’s mind, but also represents the multiplicity of the human personality.

1. Contrasted Images

A Piece of Monologue on the stage presents a speaker alone in a dim room. The costume of the speaker and the furnishings provide a vivid contrast of colours - white images in a dark room. The white-haired speaker is dressed in white costumes. His chief furniture is a white lamp and a white bed. He describes his mirror image as having white hair, a gown, and socks. With many contrasted expressions, the motionless man depicts his image as moving around and engaging in nightly routines. These nightly routines include first looking out of a window and then groping his way to light a standard lamp and looking at the now blank wall to which the pictures of loved ones were once pinned. As already mentioned, the speaker doesn't actually move on the stage to do these nightly routines, and his action itself is not written in the stage directions. The speaker just describes what "he" is doing, introducing many images opposite to each other as follows:

Born dead of night. Sun long sunk behind the larches. New needles turning green. In the room dark gaining. Till faint light from standard lamp. Wick turned low. And now. This night. Up at nightfall. Every nightfall. Faint light in room. Whence unknown. None from window. No. Next to none. No such thing as none. Gropes to window and stares out. Stands there staring out. Stock still staring out. Nothing stirring in that black vast. Gropes back in the end to where the lamp is standing. Was standing. When last went out (425).

The first statement, "Born dead of night" echoes, in sound and meaning, the first sentence of the play, "Birth was the death of him". The grammatically abbreviated phrase makes its meaning slightly ambiguous: was "he" born at midnight, or was "he" born a dead man in the night? Although the phrase has the connotation of the latter, of course, the former is what is actually meant here. At any rate, birth and death appear once again in one expression. The tension brought about by the contrast between birth and death is continued in the next image: "Sun long sunk behind the larches. New needles turning green". The death of the day and the birth of the larch

needles are described contrastively at the same time. The man gets “up” at night-“fall”. Again, his life begins at the end of daylight, which also contributes to establishing this combination of opposites, life and death, without settling into one or the other of the two contradictory states. The driving force of his narrative is produced at the intersection between life and death.

Let’s examine more contrasted images. In the above quotation, the darkness gaining on the room is soon lit up by the standard lamp, but its light is nearly going out. When the speaker says “No such thing as none [no light]” he emphasizes the negative sound of “no” repeated twice, which produces a quite certain positive meaning. But the strong assertion is again denied: there is “nothing stirring” out of the window. In this case, the following statements always cancel the previous ones, sometimes putting two negative words side by side, and then producing a very convincing phrase. As a result, one statement is always threatened to be replaced with another contrary one. But these contrasted images are not completely changed. Rather, these two contrary descriptions, repeatedly told, gradually interact with each other. For example, in another scene of the text, the speaker says “Dark whole again. Blest dark. No. No such things as whole” (428). Mary Bryden points out that “Blest dark” closely corresponds to the black silence used in a monastery, especially in the Benedictine one. According to the Benedictine distinction, she says, there are two kinds of silence: “The first is the silence lit by lamps. It is likely to be a temporary silence, since servants will have to return to tend the lamps. The second is the silence which ensues when the lights, left unattended, go out” (Bryden 175). This black silence is total blackness, implying death, and the lamplight of which monks must take care represents the light of life. As she says, there is a striking similarity between the rules of St. Benedict and the play. In that quotation, the “Dark whole” means death, but the death is “blest” by God. Even if the phrase “No such thing as whole” denies death, the death is a highly desirable one for Christians. Death is not a negative expression from the Christian point of view. If the darkness is tied up together with blessing, we can interpret the phrase “No such thing as whole” in two ways. First, if there is no whole darkness, there can’t be a blessing, either. That’s very pessimistic. Second, even if there is no whole darkness, there remains a dim light, and then we can hope to receive a blessing from God, however small. That’s positive. So we can’t easily judge the sentence as negative. Death can be changed into a blessing, and vice versa.

They can be equivalent and replaceable as long as these opposed expressions interact with each other.

There are two opposing meanings in the contrasted images told in one expression or in successive lines. Juxtaposing life and death or darkness and blessing, Beckett creates an effect as if those contradictory states were making a unity of opposites that shows us, in fact, not the contradiction but the closeness of opposites.

2. Repetition

The stage is not left in total blackness but in barely visible white “diffuse light”. There are two kinds of light in the play: the light that doesn’t come from the lamp, and the light that the “standard lamp” makes, controlled by the narrated man. The former light comes “whence unknown” as the speaker says. Though darkness is “gaining” in the room, it is bathed in a “Faint light” of unseen origin. When the man wakes, habitually “at nightfall”, and “gropes to window and stares out” of the window, there is already this “Faint light” in room. It is always there regardless of his intentions, and keeps its faint light as long as he lives. This is the light that is ceaselessly there, but there is another light, and it calls for further consideration, so let us take a look at this light more closely.

The light of the “standard lamp” that “went out” before he lights it is lit every time he awakes. This light has faintly illuminated the world around him since the very first moment of his birth when darkness already began to gain on him and his room. In contrast to the ceaseless light, this light from the lamp has to do with the speaker’s intention, and as long as he keeps on speaking, it can be lit and relit again and again.

The action of lighting is depicted five times in total. The first description is the most detailed. But the next description of the same event is cut almost by half. The first time the lamp is lit, the description takes eight lines. The second time, five. And the fourth time the speaker briefly says: “Lights lamp as described” (428). The later descriptions are condensations of earlier ones. As Enoch Brater indicates, this gradual condensation or abbreviation reduces an event to nothing more than an allusion or an image, depriving the event of its actuality (Brater 115). Consequently, as many critics say, this routine of lighting comes to have such brevity that the speaker’s words sound like stage directions rather than narration.⁶ But, what is to be noted

here is that as these descriptions become simpler, his recollection becomes distorted and complicated. As we are told about the lighting of matches in detail, we reasonably think that the event of lighting is repeated without any addition or distortion. The more the speaker repeats, we expect, the simpler and the more abbreviated becomes the event. The eventual simplicity of the words, however, makes the context more ambiguous and confusing. That is because the speaker goes on to repeat what he once said with slight variations. For example, in the first two descriptions of lighting, the narrated “he” uses matches to light the oil lamp. But in the third one, the matches are replaced with a spill. Therefore, it is ambiguous in the fourth reference “Lights lamp as described” whether the narrated action is done with matches or spill. We can’t decide any longer which one he is using the fifth times — match or spill.

Obviously, the narrator’s lighting routine contains repetitions with a difference. Especially, the third description of lighting is closely related with the two windows that have a slight difference with each other. So, let’s have a closer look at this event:

Stands there staring beyond. Nothing. Empty dark. Till first word always the same. Night after night the same. Birth. Then slow fade up of a faint form. Out of the dark. A window. Looking west. Sun long sunk behind the larches....There in the dark that window. Night slowly falling. Eyes to the small pane gaze at that first night. Turn from it in the end to face the darkened room. There in the end slowly a faint hand. Holding aloft a lighted spill. In the light of spill faintly the hand and milk white globeSpill to wick (427).

There are two kinds of window in the play. The one is referred to several times in the play and always expressed with no articles as the window in the quotation of the previous chapter. The narrated old man looks out this window to “get his bearings”(427) and then he faces a blank wall to which pictures of loved ones are pinned. There is no mention as to what direction the window looks. But in the quotation, the other window always looks on to west and is referred to with definite or indefinite articles. Moreover, a close reading of this play, especially reading in connection with the quotation, reveals that the speaker first watches the blank wall, which always faces east and then he sees the window “beyond” that wall. He does not in fact move to look

out of the window. Then, it becomes doubtful whether this window actually looks to west or not. This window comes up when the speaker says the word "Birth." Through "the small pane" of "that window", he can see the "first night" when he was born. So he does not mention the actual window but calls up in his mind an imaginary window which functions as a threshold through which he can go into the past and come back to "Now. This night".

He always says the word "Birth" after lighting the lamp and facing the wall. Except for the opening sentence, the word "Birth" is uttered three times. Immediately after the first utterance of the word, "a" window appears, then faint hands using the spill. The second utterance is closely tied up with the ambiguous scene: "Lights lamp as described". The third has little to do with the action of lighting, it is just mentioned as "Lights and moves to face wall as described" (428), but it is followed by "window" with no article. Again, we can't decide to which window he is referring this time, window or "the" other window or still another one? So the relationship between the windows and the lighting of the oil lamp becomes more and more obscure through the repetition of these narrated actions. In her penetrating comment on *A Piece of Monologue*, Anna McMullan defines the effect of the repetition Beckett uses in the play as follows:

Just as the extremities of birth and death merge and metamorphose through the earlier repetition of phrases, the relationship between [the window and wall] poles of the nightly ritual becomes increasingly ambiguous through the pattern of repetition (McMullan 67).

The argument that she makes here is a powerful one and is true of the distinctive roles of repetition used in the play. But what is to be noted here is that the ideas of merging and metamorphosis imply a possibility of synthesis or generalization that combines different elements into one ambiguous whole, which is so untypical of this work: "No such thing as whole". As she points out in the comment, through the repeated use of the phrases referring to windows, matches and the spill, they become increasingly brief and "ambiguous". Then, "the pattern of repetition" with slight differences, even as it indicates what is repeated, brings about the eventual indeterminacy, merging past into present, east into west, "a" window or "the" window into just

“window” and matches into the spill. But this indeterminacy as to which window he refers and which one –match or spill–he uses, gives rise to another possibility that even if the speaker uses the same word, he does not always mean the same thing. This leads to the idea that while putting the contradictory images in one expression to indicate the closeness of opposites, Beckett here destroys the appearance of unity by producing similar, but different objects, suggesting that they may be originally the same thing. Leslie Hill brilliantly elucidates this effect of the repetition with slight variations Beckett uses in his works as follows:

[Beckett’s] repetition works more as a factor of fragmentation and dispersion. In Beckett’s work, virtually without exception, repetition dissociates or separates more insistently than it assembles or unifies. Its usual function is to split units of meaning...into two similar, but asymmetrical parts which...ghost each other like reflections in a mirror but with the result that the asymmetry ruins the appearance of identity (Hill 67).

In *A Piece of Monologue* the repetition with differences is a kind of misremembering of events from past to present. This gradual abbreviated repetition tears one ambiguous whole into “asymmetrical”, non-identical pieces that echo, for example, from matches to the spill or from “a” window or “the” window to just “window”. These pieces destroy the appearance of “units of meaning”, interacting and echoing with each other. As we have seen, the start of the play itself is not a true beginning, but already an end, already a repetition of something, which has already come, or gone. Then, as opposed to synthesis, to read the play is to be constantly compiling a list of recurrent, but differentiated motifs and the transformations they undergo. Thus, the use of repetition with differences is a powerful textual strategy.

This play starts with the word “Birth” and ends with the word “Gone”, relating various contradictory images with each other through repetitions. But these different images must not be unified as if they desired to have a final integration. They must remain independent, no matter how closely they may come. So considering the effects of the contrasted expressions and repetitions discussed so far, let’s go on to the topic of stage production.

3. His Totemic Double

When *A Piece of Monologue* was first performed, the review of the performance by the *New York Times* was as follows:

Character is sacrificed to temperature.... At first we are not sure if Mr. Warrilow's mouth is actually moving. Is he speaking, or is he being spoken for? Is his voice live or recorded? The light is dim and we must adjust our eyes and our ears. (*New York Times* 19 December 1979)

The review is interesting because there is a straight response from a spectator who doesn't know the play very well or who sees the play for the first time. As there are such plays as *Krapp's Last Tape* and *That Time* that precede the play and use recorded voices for their important dramatic devices, anyone who has seen them would expect, at first, the speaker to use a recorded voice. The stage is covered with so dim a light that the spectators can't decide who is actually speaking, and they are forced to pay attention to what they see and hear.

Surely this review is interesting, but it doesn't at all refer to the standard lamp. As mentioned before, Mel Gussow calls it the speaker's "totemic double". "Totem" here means an artificial object that is seen on the stage as a visual approximation to the speaker's physical presence. "Double" means a duplicate, a counterpart, and an image that portrays the duality of self. Two meters separate them, and they do not move. As we watch, the light of the "narrated" standard lamp is lit and goes out again and again, but on stage, the "actual" standard lamp sustains a steady low light, dimming out finally at the end of the play. In addition, even if two persons speak as visual embodiments of the two aspects of self, the audience will tend to think that two different characters speak discreetly instead of one divided ego. The speaker's "totemic double" must be artificial, look like the actual person, who is never allowed to perform in the play.

The Oxford English Dictionary makes reference to the verb form of "double", which includes, after more immediate meanings, this one: "To add a second layer of material to (a garment); to line". So just as one covers the inside surface of a garment with a layer of different material, so here the existence of the speaker on stage is sus-

tained by adding to himself an image that closely resembles like himself, but can never be the same, like “reflections in a mirror” as Leslie Hill points out.

Certainly the role of the standard lamp in the play is a secondary one, but the nature of the byplay between the speaker and the lamp is difficult to recognize because of the difficulty in ascribing to the visible speaker the voice that sounds in the dark. It is understandable that the reviewer of the *New York Times* felt unwilling to decide who was speaking and whether the voice was “live or recorded”. *A Piece of Monologue* allows the two parts of the self to exist on stage simultaneously. The standard lamp plays as important a role as the speaker does.

There are no actual walls or windows on the stage. The imaginary wall and windows of which the speaker speaks only define the setting of the room. Standing as still as the lamp, the speaker speaks of his double that is the standard lamp as well as himself, shading birth with death, cradle with coffin, light with black, wall with windows, and past with present.

Conclusion

Much of the foregoing discussion has concentrated on Beckett’s choice of words, his use of repetition, many contrasted images, and the interplay between stage image and text in *A Piece of Monologue*. It would be impossible for a spectator to perceive all of the implications of the text described in this paper unless he or she had carefully studied the play before attending the theatre. But it is worth studying the complicatedly woven net effect of the text. Close reading of the play will have certainly great power over an attentive audience. After watching it, the image that remains before our eyes is made by the words of the play whose contrasted shape, sound, meaning, and repetition will draw our minds towards it in the evocation of a life in pursuit of death, and of a beginning in search of its end. And the play will make us experience visual and auditory hallucinations, subtly blurring the boundary between the actual man before our eyes and the visions he has in his mind for as long as we can remember it in our mind.

Notes

¹ As is referred to in this paper, the word “Totemic Double” is the felicitous phrase of Mel Gussow describing the standard lamp in *A Piece of Monologue*. But he uses the word with no explanation about the meaning. The word “totem” is originally used by Native American Indians as an emblem of a clan or individual. Taking this meaning into account, this paper endeavors to examine the word more in detail. As a result, it will be revealed that the role of the standard lamp is as important as other Beckettian dramatic devices mentioned in this paper.

² Beckett wrote *A Piece of Monologue* in English in response to a request from David Warrilow, a prominent Beckettian actor. He asked Beckett to write a piece for him, on the subject of death. The play was first performed, by Warrilow, in December 1979, at La Mama Theater in New York. All extracts from the play are from *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986). Page numbers are given in parentheses.

³ As Kristin Morrison points out, there are many unusual words or unusual usages in the play (Morrison, 349). A spill is one of them, which means “a thin strip of wood, spiral tube, etc. of paper for lighting candles” (Fletcher and Fletcher, 244).

⁴ The speaker says he has survived “two and half billion seconds” and “thirty thousand nights” (425). Linda-Ben Zvi calculates the figure and says that “This [figure] works out to 79 years of seconds and 82 years of nights, a typically Beckettian calibration that doesn’t quite work...” (Ben-Zvi 11).

⁵ Although the written text is short, Warrilow performed it so slowly that the performance lasted fifty-five minutes. During the monologue, he remained practically motionless in a standing position downstage to the left of the audience, and his face was not clearly seen.

⁶ It is impossible to mention all of the names of the critics. The argument in this paper is mainly based on that of Ruby Cohn and James Knowlson.

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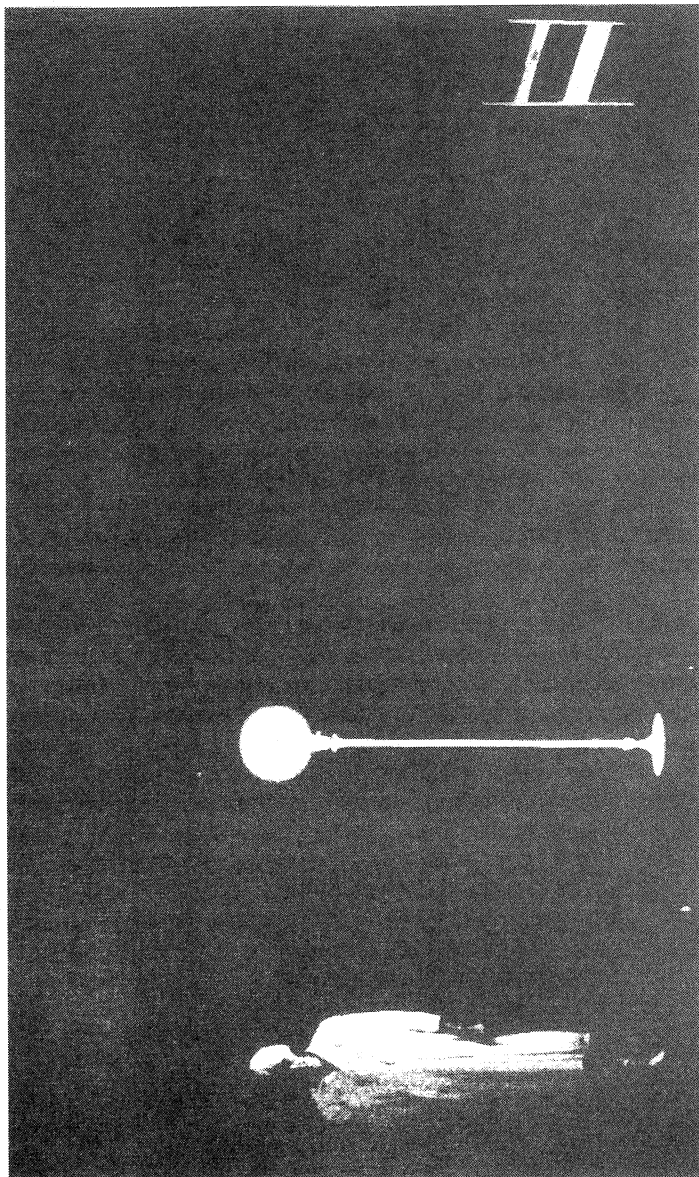


Figure La Mama Theatre Club's production of *A Piece of Monologue* (1979): David Warrilow as the Speaker