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What is the Word:

Late Beckett Throbbing Between Drama and Poetry

Edited by Rosy Colombo

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<https://skenejournal.skenejournal.it>
info@skenejournal.it

Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com
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Thia Path
Orizzonti Mobili, details
Acrylic and pastel on canvas
100*130 cm
2025

ROSY COLOMBO*

Introduction

. . . folly for to need to seem to glimpse
(Beckett 2009a, 115)

The current *Skenè* issue draws inspiration from a Beckett Symposium held in Verona in May 2025, with contributions focused on late Beckett's radical experiments in writing at the intersection of genres, languages and new media, in the uncertain years following the Second World War.¹ Beckett's "folly", a compulsive search for a new, performative language not representing reality but being reality in itself, i.e. not working on a metaphorical but rather on a symbolic level, led him to drama, although not in the spirit of Eliot's and Yeats's verse plays, but rather as a conflation of poetic and dramatic practices, in which one is never subdued by the other. This experimental engrafting required several decisive breaks – from Beckett's native English and from Joyce's heavy authority ("I vow I will get over J. J. ere I die. Yessir", he had written in 1931; Beckett 2009b, 108) – and a move towards a practice of bilingualism/multilingualism, with French as the language of his adopted exile which granted him freedom from 'style', i.e. from the weight of literary tradition and from the expectations that came with writing in one's native tongue. Beckett would not return to English until *All That Fall* (1956), significantly a radio play, which shows how new media enabled him to work across and beyond conventional genre boundaries. Radio required compositions for sound rather than text, and the contemporary silent cinema

¹ The issue rethinks and extends the Symposium's conversations by bringing together newly commissioned essays alongside revised versions of selected papers first presented at the event: <https://skene.dlls.univr.it/en/2025/05/12/what-is-the-word-late-beckett-throbbing-between-drama-and-poetry/> (Accessed, December 2025).

* Sapienza University of Rome - rosamariacolombosmith@gmail.com

which would inspire his *Film* (1964) compelled another kind of listening; both pushed him towards an aesthetics of reduction and eventual dissolution of the written word, in an endless process of deconstruction.

Saint-Lô (1946), a poem devoted to the “capital of ruins”,² can be taken as a turning point. Here the ruins are twofold: on the one hand, the material debris of the town with shadows awaiting a rational and human postwar reconstruction; on the other the collapse of the artist’s mind into “havoc” (Beckett 2009a, 49). As a result, the relationship with ruins becomes central to Beckett’s work, as it had been in *The Waste Land*; but while Eliot’s poetic creation stands as a bulwark against the ruins, Beckett’s method is to transfer the fragments to the body of language itself. But the riddle is: “what where” (as in his 1983 dramatic piece), and, especially, *What is the Word* (1989)?

Actually, *What is the Word* asks an ontological question about language that Beckett had been pursuing throughout an aesthetic of failure and silence, working with “impotence” – his challenge to the “omnipotence” of his powerful mentor (Shenker 1956, 129). A mentor, however, to whom he will return in his worship of the grammar of music:³ words as sounds (as in Joyce’s *Work in Progress*), repetition, fragmentation, in a rigorous keeping of metrics, including rhythm and pause. The poem is the last piece Beckett wrote, yet not final, “a conclusion in which nothing is concluded” (Johnson 1976, 149), in the disenchanting spirit of Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* and *Vanity of Human Wishes*.⁴ The text, wavering between poetry and prose, is envisaged as the cause of Beckett’s entire body of work, engaging his late production as if it were the starting point of a creative process towards unwording the word. It poses a crucial question, asking however for an impossible answer.

The grammatical impossibility of the line quoted at the opening of this foreword – three infinitives placed one after another, never arriving at a main verb – creates a clause that seems to hang mid-air, as if waiting for a resolution it never receives. Beckett first wrote the poem in French, as

² *The Capital of the Ruins* was a radio script that Beckett devoted to *Saint-Lô*. The city was heavily bombed during the Second World War.

³ Beckett’s deep sympathy for Samuel Johnson’s fits of depression as well as in his liminal dealing with classical norms between acceptance and refusal to blindly adhere to them (as in the case of Shakespeare) is still not widely studied, despite Beckett’s programmatic statement: “They can put me wherever they want, but it’s Johnson, always Johnson, who is with me. And if I follow any tradition, it is his” (see Beckett’s 1972 interview with Deirdre Bair in Bair 1978, 272. See also Colombo 2019).

⁴ Beckett was an accomplished amateur musician. Together with Beethoven, Schubert is a key reference point for him (see Olk 2023, 8). Besides, Schubert’s tendency not to finish his pieces, leaving them suspended, as in the case of the *Unfinished Symphony No. 8*, is a shared feature. In spite of his lack of interest in contemporary avant garde music (unlike his bent for abstract painting), he was certainly attracted to John Cage’s experimental performing of silence.

Comment dire, while recovering from a fall in 1988, when he could barely hold a pen. The text bears clear marks of that physical difficulty. However, the broken syntax is not only biographical. Beckett had long explored the challenge of not completing a sentence, of not moving from subject to verb to object, and of not reaching syntactic closure. This becomes evident if we hear the echo of Lucky's monologue in *Waiting for Godot*, written nearly forty years earlier. In *What is the Word* speech stalls and remains suspended, unable to move forward; in Lucky's words, language pours out in a flood of subordinate clauses without ever arriving at a main clause. One voice cannot speak; the other cannot stop speaking. Both express the same impossibility: a failure to move from subordination to statement, from syntactic promise to syntactic completion. They are opposite forms of the same impasse, different in scale and intensity but not in kind.

Once these two moments are set side by side, a further question arises: what happened "in between"? The standard account of Beckett's career proposes a gradual reduction: shorter plays, tighter prose, fewer characters and voices, until almost nothing seems to remain. And this may seem true at first glance – *Breath* (1969), which lasts about thirty seconds and has no actors, is shorter than *Endgame* (1957); the *mirlitonades* are shorter than *Whoroscope* (1930), Beckett's first published poem; but this model assumes that Beckett started from a kind of fullness that gets progressively thinned. Nevertheless, if one returns to *Godot*, there is no fullness to begin with: only a bare stage, two tramps, a leafless tree and a dialogue built from repetitions, misunderstandings and silence. The play, in its essence, is already minimal. What, then, is being reduced exactly?

One possible answer is that it is mediation, rather than content, that gets reduced. *Godot* still gives us named characters, a recognisable situation (waiting, Beckett's crucial topic, recalling Dante's Belacqua patiently waiting for an access to Purgatory), and a set that represents, however sparsely, a place. The late prose works discard almost all of this: characters fade into voices, there are no longer situations but only the act of speaking itself. It is as though Beckett had come to regard even a bare stage as too much furniture, and had cleared it away to expose what had been there all along: the difficulty of utterance as such, the question of how anything can be said at all. On this reading, his late work does not leave his early work behind but strips away what was, even in *Godot*, already a minimal scaffolding, to show the structure such scaffolding had been built around.

Nevertheless, this account carries its own risks. If we read Beckett's late production as a kind of unveiling, a laying bare of essences, we risk imposing a teleology on his entire work, as though *What is the Word* were the goal he had been heading towards all along, with his earlier plays and novels as merely steps towards it. The main core is that Beckett's late pieces clarify

the early ones without superseding them. What we are dealing with, then, is not development but mutual implication; resemblance requires difference rather than identity. *Godot* and *What is the Word* (1989) do not stand in a before-and-after relation, but reveal what was latent in each other all along.

The essays collected here explore that mutual implication across the genres and periods of Beckett's output, though they do not argue for a single, unified thesis but rather share the belief that conventional divisions – drama here, prose there, poetry elsewhere – tend to obscure meaningful connections. When Winnie in *Happy Days* says “What is that unforgettable line?” (Beckett 1961, 50), and then fails to recall it, she is enacting something not unlike what *What is the Word* does throughout: reaching for a fundamental word that will not come, circling around an absence that cannot be filled. The difference is that Winnie is a character embedded in a theatrical situation – buried up to her waist in the first act, up to her neck in the second – while the speaker of *What is the Word*, if there is one, has been reduced to nothing but voice. But the gesture is the same; whether we call it thematic, structural, or something else is what the contributors attempt to tackle.

“In my end is my beginning”, Eliot writes in the *Four Quartets*, referencing Mary Queen of Scots (Eliot 1971, 129). The line could work as an epigraph for this *Skenè* collection, though as a question to explore rather than a thesis to prove. If the end is already in the beginning, then the path from *Godot* to *What is the Word* is not a move from more to less, or from fullness to emptiness, but an ongoing engagement with the same difficulty under changing conditions. How to understand that engagement across such different forms and media is a question the essays open without presuming to resolve.

Carla Locatelli's essay offers a first entry point. Drawing on Genette's idea of the ‘text in the second degree’, she resists the reassuring temptation to separate Beckett's ‘poetry’ from ‘dramatic works’ and instead looks at how a Beckettian corpus is constituted. Poems and play-scripts are not simply written, they are gathered later, arranged and read under labels whose neutrality is only apparent. From this angle, what seems like a fragmentary field – short poems, radio plays, late *dramaticules* – begins to look like a system of internal echoes, a network of “loosened linearities” and recurring images that, as Locatelli puts it, “normalise the breaches” across the whole. Thus the *mirlitonnades* stop looking like marginal residue and emerge as nodal points where themes and forms from across the oeuvre interact: lamplight, graveyard, narrative exhaustion, and obsessive returns to a few words inclusive of silence. They function like small nodes within a microtext in which the rules of the larger system are still legible in miniature. Locatelli's pages on *Comment Dire/What Is the Word* show the poem as a tightening of patterns that run through *Not I*, *Footfalls*, *Ghost Trio*,

Rockaby, and other late works marked by the “literature of the unword”, where Beckett imagines word-storms fading into murmurs, infant babble and breath.

If Locatelli invites us to see the corpus as a dynamic semiotic system, Davide Crosara turns to the material details of headpieces and tailpieces. Reading Beckett “through the lens of his poems” implies no fixed hierarchy between genres but only different viewpoints. Crosara begins with the young Beckett of *Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates*. In 1934, under the name Andrew Belis, Beckett praised poems that create a “rupture of the lines of communication” (see Beckett 1984, 70-7). These early poems act as headpieces in two ways: they open the canon and set out a programme in which the poems resist interpretation. Later, Crosara considers the Faber *Selected Poems* and Italian editions that print *Rockaby* as a poem. Here, tailpieces behave like headpieces: *Who may tell the tale* placed at the end, *Age is when to a man* extracted from *Words and Music*, and late circular texts that Gabriele Frasca prints as verse. These last poems, though placed at the end, reopen the sequence. From this paratextual perspective, Beckett’s end becomes his beginning: the final poems send the reader back through the earlier work.

Rossana Sebellin’s essay gives this insight a theoretical articulation. Taking seriously Beckett’s claim to Alan Schneider that his work concerns “fundamental sounds” (1984, 109), she traces the consequences of this claim across languages and media. She argues that the conflation of drama and poetry depends on a deeper link between language and sound. For Beckett, living between English and French (and German), words first appear as strange sounds and only later as meaning. He hovers in a zone of “grey noise” (81) between sense and nonsense. His prose, drama, and poetry attempt, at different levels, to shape sound – to create scores meant for murmuring, shouting, or breathing. From the echoes in *Echo’s Bones* and the comic rhythms of *Mercier and Camier* to the quiet pulses of *Rockaby*, *Roundelay*, and *What Is the Word*, Sebellin maps a single movement: away from the dictates of genre and towards an over-genre of sound. In this context, the repeated question “what is the word” becomes a search for a final sound, a minimal unit that still counts as expression.

At this point, theatre can no longer be treated as a separate domain into which some of this sonic material is ‘adapted’. Two essays, by Barry Spence and Stefano Genetti, insist that Beckett’s theatre and the dance pieces it has inspired reveal the conflation of poetic and dramatic writing at the level of bodies and space. Spence’s idea of the “exilic body” is one way of naming that choice. Reading *Film*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Act Without Words*, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, *Happy Days*, *Play* and *Not I* together, he proposes that they share a paratactic dramaturgy in which bodies are subjected to a sequence of

situations without support from a stable narrative. These figures are exiled not only socially but linguistically: they inhabit no discourse capable of grounding them; they are delivered over to gestures and phrases that return like musical motifs – Estragon’s boots, Hamm’s and Clov’s routines, Krapp’s rewound tape, Winnie’s objects, the rotating urns of *Play*, the disembodied Mouth pouring out speech in the third person. No concession to the identity of an I. In such a theatre, the word is already somewhat a beat, a unit in an acoustic pattern. Seen alongside Sebellin’s argument, Spence’s exilic body might be understood as the physical counterpart of the sonic object that persists in a world where meaning has collapsed, moving according to the rhythms imposed by the text-as-score.

Genetti pushes this logic further by following what happens when Beckett’s texts are literally taken up as scores by choreographers. His analysis of François Raffinot’s *Al Segno* shows that late prose and drama – *Sans*, *Compagnie* – provide choreographic structures when read as systems of repetition and silence rather than narratives. In *Al Segno*, dancers lie down, rise, fail, pace, cover their mouths, as if following an invisible script. Sentences from *Sans* are mouthed silently while hands block the lips. The voice disappears but leaves a trace in timing and breath. What Beckett imagined as the fading of language into breath becomes a physical movement. If contemporary dancers can stage Beckett’s pieces as choreography, if *Quad* can be seen as a dumb ballet, if *Rockaby* and *Footfalls* are scripts for minimal gestures, then the line between ‘dramatic’ and ‘poetic’ dissolves. The same principles – permutation, repetition, attenuation – shape the page, the stage and the studio.

One might object that all this focus on internal analogies overlooks the real fractures in the external history of Beckett’s texts. Stanley E. Gontarski’s inquiry into *Godot*’s “bad quartos” serves, in this sense, as a necessary corrective. By reconstructing the history of acting editions, production scripts and scenic inventions, he shows that the ‘Beckett text’ is never given in a pure originary form, its origin being always displaced. Even during the author’s lifetime, occasionally with his approval and sometimes not, *Waiting for Godot* was cut, padded, censored, amended. What many readers and spectators carry as their first experience of Beckett is in fact already a second-degree construction shaped by theatre practitioners, agents and institutions. Gontarski’s genetic dossier does not simply engage in the fall from authorial control; it compels us to rethink creativity in historical terms. Hence, any attempt to hear the “fundamental sounds” Beckett speaks of must necessarily transit through this noisy channel.

The choice in bringing these essays together under the title chosen for the Verona symposium, *What is the Word. Late Beckett Throbbing between Drama and Poetry* is to let them illuminate one another along a few key concepts.

Locatelli's and Crosara's work on corpus-building and paratext create the framework through which sound and body, as described by Sebellin, Spence and Genetti, take on significance; and Gontarski's account of textual mediations remind us that no internal apparent continuity is innocent, that every "beginning" and "end" are marked by decisions, omissions, and institutional forces. What the essays share, I argue, is instead the implicit rejection of a comforting periodisation that would carve the oeuvre into a 'dramatic' middle flanked by prose experiments and minor poems. Instead, they suggest that Beckett's writing should be approached as a single macrotext where languages and forms interact, beginnings anticipate endings, and endings send us back to the start.

Reading Beckett under that sign means accepting an obvious instability. One cannot say where the poem stops and the play begins, where the text turns into sound, where the author's voice gives way to that of a director, an actor or a choreographer. All in all, if *What Is the Word* stands at the end, it does so only to invite us to read Beckett's entire work both backwards and forwards, to hear in his early plays the resonance of his late poems, and in his late poems the echo of an opening question that was there from the start; in the absence of a foundational, original word, "what" and "where" can a constitutive language be, once all the structures and the written letters that supported it have been removed from its texture?

Beckett's last piece reads like the agony of a failed childbirth, almost a rewriting of the Joycean *Ecce puer*. In performing an act of liminal coexistence of birth and death it touches upon another crucial question: "is it not better to abort than be barren"? (*Cascando*, 1936 and 1961; Beckett 2009a, 35). This symbolic scenario of failure demands a shift from early Beckett's ironical disposition to an ethics of compassion: for the ordeal of artistic creation with language can be used as a tool of torture (*Catastrophe*, 1982, dedicated to Václav Havel in jail; *What Where* 1983, a stage play adapted into a TV drama in a self-translation into German) as well as a token of compassion for the human condition.

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Edizioni ETS

Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa

info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com

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