

Timbral Poetics: Samuel Beckett and the Impossible Voice

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Beckett's poetic sequence "mirlitonades" both thematizes and tests the possibilities of human voice. The title invokes a mirliton, a kazoo or a toy instrument that produces a buzzing timbral sound, something the poem emulates through various kinds of sound patterning, phonetic assonances, and resonances. Shaping a soundscape full of timbral and vibrational registers with no significant metrical or prosodic purpose, Beckett situates his poetic speaker in the valley between sound and sense, partly mocking the annexation of sound by meaning and expression. Timbral poetics is thus defined here as the production of a distinct noise or resonance in poetry that resists all signification.

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Introduction

Beckett's poetic sequence "*mirlitonades*" voices the event, one that is yet to come or fails to come, but in doing so it also marks the event of voice. This event is at once an event of enunciation, of human voice produced in the shape of poetic quatrains and repeated in the mind of the reader, as it is an event of language and of a sign-system imbued with the task of self-expression. "[*M*]irlitonades," like much of Beckett's late poetry and prose, welcomes and banishes the unnamed event in the same breath. However, what is unique to the voice in "*mirlitonades*" is the brevity and the eagerness with which it attends to this future event, however impossible this event it might be. It is this impossibility at the heart of Beckettian event that gives the voice in "*mirlitonades*" an oscillation or vibrational force that is unique even among Beckett's late poetry.

Beckett composed "*mirlitonades*" around the last decades of his life, between 1976 and 1978 and then between 1980 and 1983. These fifty-nine doggerels composed in both French and English share their elliptical but minimal style with other Beckett poems of the time like "Long After Chamfort" and his prose such as "Worstword Ho" and "Ill Seen, Ill Said." Beckett's chosen name for these short verses, "*mirlitonades*," suggests *vers de mirliton* or poems written in a light vein, "condensed witticisms that telescope the thematic concerns Beckett was addressing (mainly) in prose" (Nixon, 92).

However, the poem also evokes a complex, disruptive musical context as *mirliton* is French for a kazoo or toy instrument that gives a buzzing, timbral quality to the person's voice who blows in it. As I argue, Beckett's "*mirlitonades*" is an achievement of timbre, of vibrational resonance, that none of his other poems achieve in quite the same measure. "[*M*]irlitonades." I argue here, acoustically opens itself to the risk of the event, neither through literary allusions—a staple of his early poetry—nor through a fiercely personal lyrical voice as the one used in "Six Poèmes," but through putting to the test the very possibilities and limits of voice and poetic voice. This claim contrasts Perloff's conclusions in "The Evolution of Beckett's Poetry" (2019), which treats "mirliton" as afterthoughts or unsuccessful fragments at best, while celebrating his late prose works for precisely its capacity to adopt a non-narrative lyric structure and produce "text-soundings" (Perloff 79). I argue instead that the poetic form adopted in "*mirlitonades*," with its blatant disregard for pronominals and indicative verbs, severely questions the voice—its timbre, its source, and its function—and thus produces "soundings" singularly different from his other works. Thus, in what follows, I read "*mirlitonades*" as a unique event of listening and voicing.

Not unlike the musical instrument after which it is named, "*mirlitonades*" is at once infantile and tonally rich. Although Beckett himself described them as "doggerels," they are not simply "light" or "comic" verses. They seem to be enmeshed with the event of voice that Beckett was equally concerned with in his prose pieces from this period. Even though all readings of "*mirlitonades*" register this detail without fail, finding in it something more than the "sillinesses" of the doggerel form—a "silliness" that Beckett cherishes in various registers throughout his oeuvre—these readings also concern themselves solely with how the poems echo and amplify the themes from more well-known Beckett prose works of the time.

However, what these readings miss is the unique poetic voice "*mirlitonades*" affects, one in which silliness and lightness are not simply shielding a more urgent message or event. This unique voice adopted by "*mirlitonades*," in other words, is as much the event as is the one it is marking the absence of. It is in the voice—its modulations, rhythms, ellipsis, and vibrations—that the event of identity, language, or life itself, finds itself both welcomed and banished.

One has to read the definition of *mirlitonnades* or *vers de mirliton* literally to begin to understand the double-bind the poems find themselves in vis-à-vis their poetic voice. As defined in “Linternaute”:

De mirliton est une expression désuète pour qualifier quelque chose dont la qualité est mauvaise voire médiocre. Exemple: La poésie était si mauvaise que certains qualifièrent les vers de mirliton. (Linternaute, n.d.)

(De mirliton is an obsolete expression to qualify something whose quality is poor or mediocre. Example: The poetry was so bad that some called the lines a doggerel).

Now “mauvais” in this context can be translated to mean both ‘bad’ or ‘silly’ or, as has been argued in other readings of “*mirlitonnades*,” it can denote a lightness of idiom or the elliptical phrasing. Their “mauvais” character however depends not only on the lightness of their content, i.e. use of extremely short and rhyming sentences, but also on how they “sound.”

Beckett’s doggerels, like the sound of kazoo, bears a human voice but with a timbral inflection, turning it into *vers de mirliton*.¹ It would not be far-fetched then to suggest that even when the poetic sequence named after a kazoo or a children’s toy bears a human voice, it is a voice that is heavily inflected and palpably altered, placing it either beyond communicative language. There is certainly an element of infantilization in how “*mirlitonnades*” sets up its event of voice, an event borne out by incomplete and fragmentary sentences. As my readings below suggest, there are many places in “*mirlitonnades*” where the voice seems to belong to a phase in language development that immediately follows a child’s babble. Though instead of making a historical or a metaphysical distinction between infancy and history, or pre-linguistic and linguistic, I would read this singular inflection in “*mirlitonnades*” as timbre and vibration.

Timbre

How are we to understand a poetic voice that is, paradoxically, also searching for a voice within the poem? How are we to make sense of the displacement that this voice carries out upon itself within “*mirlitonrades*,” so much so that the poem is left devoid of any anterior or bona fide voice? What is one to make of the event *of* voice, which almost every small doggerel in “*mirlitonrades*” anticipates, welcomes, while at the same time this anticipation is itself voiced? In other words, how does one speak without a pre-existing ability or identity to speak with? These are the very questions that one can also ask of Beckettian failure and how it is at all voiced “successfully” in Beckett’s poetry.

However, the event of failure or the failure of the event make themselves available to voice not as presence but as a secret, a trace. “[*M*]irlitonrades,” often understood as “capturing moods, emotional insights and the flotsam and jetsam of mental observations” (Nixon 94), is very much a trace of that yearned-for voice and a trace of the event that would bring about this voice. But this trace of voice, like the trace of failure, is not quiescent or inert; it is rather a lyrical event in its own right. In other words, what makes “*mirlitonrades*” an event *of* voice is not the presence or the absence of the event itself, but rather the poem’s obstinate place in the vicinity of the event, as Cixous argues in “Zero’s Neighbour”: “A little something is no mean (no)thing, it is a little nothing, it is never nothing, one gets nearer, the Neighbour goes to Zero’s, the null set. The Neighbour in the vicinity or his Voice.” (9) What Cixous goes on to spatially call “v(o)icinity” is also the voice of “*mirlitonrades*,” a voice that is always the event’s “neighbour” or in its neighborhood but never its tenant or guest. Thus, one can listen to the event, its timbre, because of being in its vicinity, neither too close nor too far.

While writing about Paul Valéry, Jacques Derrida puts great emphasis on timbre pointing toward “its irreplaceable quality,” going on to argue that “the timbre of the voice marks the event of language” (*Quelle Quelle* 215). Derrida sets store by the “irreplaceability” of timbre, for it is the tone or quality of sound that remains singular and unrepeatable in a voice, rather than its linguistic content or style, both of which can be reproduced easily. Timbre becomes an event of language in that in it the voice finds a singular force that differentiates it from the self-same and coded system of language. Made of simple and minimal

constructions, and relying heavily on rhythm, cross rhyme, deixis, and injunctions, the strange music one hears in “*mirlitonades*” speaks in its own accent. The uninhibitedness of the poem is signaled by both a conspicuous absence of pronouns and a tonal consonance that allows it to fall lightly on the ear. As the poem below illustrates, this unique tonal voice is set up to invite a language rather than assume its possession, to invite a language that is yet to come:

écoute-les

s'ajouter

les mots

aux mots

sans mot

les pas

aux pas

un à

un (Collected Poems 211)

My translation: “listen to them / add / words / more words / without word / step / by step/ one after / another.”

This short poem is placed after five other doggerels in the French “*mirlitonades*” that is part of the *Collected Poems*, and it opens with a directive— “*écoute-les*”—to listen to something unknown.² The instruction in the opening lines is abrupt and lacks an immediate object— “*écoute-les*” or ‘listen to them’— but who or what exactly one is not told. The injunction might also be directed at the voice’s own self, which, if this were a monologue, is reminding the self to listen. Notwithstanding who the audience is, the voice certainly assumes a listener to whom its first word is a command to “*écoute-les*,” framing this audience as first and foremost a listener. The voice, rather than instructing the listener to hear the voice or the poem, is directing the listener’s attention to “les” or ‘them.’

The collective pronoun is used to refer to a variety of objects that appear in the next three lines —“*mots*,” “*aux mots*,” and “*sans mot*.” Although all the three noun-phrases are meant to denote “words” or language, they are slightly different from each other. If one reads them together as a single line, which would be true to the kind of word play Beckett practices in his other poems and prose of the time, the line would read something like this in English—‘listen to them / add up / words / after words /without word.’ Although “*sans mot*” asks to be heard as a contraction of “*sans mot dire*,” literally ‘without saying a word,’ but more generally ‘silently.’ The noun “*mot*,” oddly enough, is in the singular, so the lines literally mean that one listens to ‘words / afterwords’ but without the ‘word.’ The singular might imply here an absence of a final word. Thus, in listening one adds words after words without ever reaching an end. This reading corresponds well to the last lines of the poem, where this act of addition is being compared to taking one step after another, an endless exercise without reaching a final sum or a destination, and thus a collection, a gathering, or an accumulation of words without a final word.

Instead of listening to one voice that is receiving words, forming a syntactical unit, the poem refers to a voice that remains fundamentally plural and perhaps even separate from the actual spoken words or “*les mots*.” Here voice is isolated from the accumulation of words, or an exercise in meaning-making, and instead operates just as a unique timbre that speaks the words, exceeds them, or is even independent of them altogether as a pure voice. However, it is not just the listener who is exposed to this event of the voice, it is also the written poem, which while operating on more levels than one, is hearing and gathering different layers of sound.

Keeping this in mind, one can think of the commands in the first lines as being directed at the poem itself rather than a person. The poem has to be commanded to listen to words and what perhaps lies beyond words, i.e. timbre. Derrida reads Valéry to suggest that timbre in a poetic work rests neither with form nor with content. Likewise the timbre of “*mirlitonades*” emanates neither from the “*mots*” it employs nor from how these “*mots*” are arranged, but rather from how these words are voiced, as is true of poetry generally, and how this voice is inscribed in the poem.

The persistence of consonantal “t” sound in the first two lines with the repetition of “te” in “*écoute*” and “*s’ajouter*,” progresses into an invisible and unpronounced hiss with “ts,” as the next two lines repeat “mots,” finally ending with just “t,” which is again unpronounced in “mot.” The “t” sound is completely shunned in the last two lines, which itself fits in a different timbral patterning that runs through the poem —ou, ou, mo, mo, pa, pa, un, un and the eh sounds of “les” and “-ter”—containing the vowel sounds that appear in pairs from the first line onward. Despite the repetition, there is also a clear transition that can be heard in the poem where the vowels in the first two lines are enveloped in consonantal sounds, the next three pair of sounds are not bound by consonants and leave the mouth much freely. This freedom of vowel sound, however, is tied to other prepositions and determiners, except the last line that just ends in an “un.” In the penultimate lines with “*un à*” and “*un*” the voice almost vibrates within the “un” sound, using “à” as a temporary resting place.

I am not pointing out these tonal relations between the lines to suggest that there is an autonomy in how these sounds interact with each other independent of the words, but rather that timbre remains an integral part of “*mirlitonades*” and the voice that speaks it. Sound patterning and “timbre” in the ways that I am suggesting here remain staple for much of modernist poetry, but this aspect is much more preponderant in “*mirlitonades*” than is usually the case. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the event of language that the poem quoted above anticipates is one that is already delivered to the poem through this timbre. Even though the poem is oriented toward welcoming “words,” “step” by “step,” the timbre of the poem itself, like a bell or a gong, rings through its body, already delivering the voice an event that is not contingent upon “*mots*” or ‘words.’ If on the one hand the poem imagines language as a trace that must be heard one by one, whose coherence might be impossible, the poem simultaneously carries traces of sounds that set up their own relationship with each other and with this incoherent language.

Most commentaries on “*mirlitonades*” think of this trace exclusively as visual fragments, as snatches from Beckett’s everyday life captured in playful and direct verses, paying little attention to the voice that mobilizes this trace.³ Take for example David Wheatley’s reading, where “each version [of *mirlitonades* is] like a separate exposure of the moment of illumination being described. Unable to make up its mind

between light and dark, the poem concludes with the already quoted self-subtracting cessation” (48). While Wheatley emphasizes visual or illuminative elements of “*mirlitonades*” that make these fragments unique, Mark Nixon believes the sequence remains unique because these traces are spontaneous and correspond exactly to the time of their notation. He explains: “The *mirlitonades* manuscript material is unique, or at least startling, in two respects: the scraps of paper found here attest to an immediacy of notation within an outburst of creative inspiration not evident elsewhere, and the specific nature of the scraps and their dating contextualises this moment of writing” (Nixon 94). However, what makes the traces in “*mirlitonades*” unique is neither their illuminative style nor their quick-paced, immediate content, rather it is the timbre of the voice that lurks behind the poems; this is a timbre that both the listener *in* the poems and the listener *of* the poems is invited to hear but with no visible annotations or guidance on the page. Therefore, it is important at this point to delineate timbre from form and content, sources of Wheatley’s and Nixon’s reading respectively.

Timbre, although embedded in the formal meter of “*mirlitonades*,” is not subsumed by it. It is this subtle distinction and yet a mutual dependence between style and timbre that Derrida writes about in his essay on Valéry:

If there is one poetic event, it sounds in timbre; if there is one literary event, it is inscribed by style. [... S]tyle, supplementing timbre, tends to repeat the event of pure presence, the singularity of the source present in what it produces, supposing again that the unity of a timbre—immediately it is identifiable—ever has the purity of an event. But if style supplements timbre, nothing, it appears, can supplement their unique exchange, nothing can repeat the pure event (if at least there is something like the purity of a style and a timbre, which for me remains quite a hypothesis) that style and timbre constitute.
(215)

Summarizing Valéry's position here, which he ultimately rejects in the essay, Derrida points out the crucial difference and relationality between timbre and style. Although their purity as the poetic event remains questionable, what is absolute is that both timbre and style—contrary to Valéry's claim—are not immediately identifiable in the works that produce them, and even more singular and undiscoverable is the relation they share in producing the poetic event that ultimately offers the poem to its reader or listener. This poetic event is as much a product of sound as it is of inscription. The written word in a poem is sounded, and timbre lies somewhere in this phonetic manifestation, in the elusive and inexhaustible difference between sight and sound. In establishing this unity between sound and inscription, however, Derrida is not vouching for an autonomy of voice, nor is something of the kind possible in "*mirlitonades*."

In fact, Derrida's work is a concerted effort to upend an older and much cherished understanding of voice within phenomenology where *phonē* or sound is always received as a sacrosanct source of *logos* or knowledge. Moreover, phenomenology treats voice as a tool of auto-affection, an inner monologue that is spoken and heard by the human subject. This self-hearing is, for phenomenology and particularly for Husserl, the cornerstone of an autonomous human consciousness that hears itself in the very moment it speaks and in the most immediate fashion. Neither Derrida's work on timbre nor "*mirlitonades*" claims such a position for the voice. On the contrary, as Waltham-Smith argues, Derrida's work opens "the possibility of philosophy penetrating its (tympanic) membrane and insists upon the impossibility, amid the labyrinth of the ear and the folds of the flesh, of telling inside from outside." (3)

It is precisely this tympanic membrane, separating inside from outside, that the traces collected in "*mirlitonades*" are trying to pierce. Beckett's poem, despite being written in a distinct, recognizably individual voice at no point becomes an interior monologue. It resists the compulsions of such an individual voice, fragment after fragment, where pronominal clauses are avoided, and the rims of interiority are breached. For Beckett, it is only the timbre of a kazoo or a *mirliton* that is ultimately capable of speaking this breakdown, also implying that the voice can speak only with prosthetic aid it receives from the instrument.

Consider the following poems from “*mirlitonades*” where the interiority of the voice is delimited:

there
 the life late led
down there
 all **done** unsaid (221)

“Brief Dream”
 Go end **there**
One fine day
Where never till **then**
 Till as much as to **say**
 No matter **where**
 No matter **when** (224)

The use of the spatial deixis “there” in both poems inaugurates a border between what is “here” and “now,” a place occupied by the speaker, and what is “there” where life is “late led” or where one has never been “till then.” Generally one cannot say “there” without constructing a “here,” which exists as a product of the discourse, yet the speaker does not give us any detail of the “here” or “now.” The voice it seems emerges from elsewhere—a place that has no geographical sign ascribed to it, at least not in the poem. Yet, the voice is bound to its role of delineating the space of “there,” which in the first poem resembles our own lived world where everything is slightly delayed, deferred or “late.” In this world where one does not have access to a universal present or now, one commits to actions that are “unsaid” or by the virtue of the delay “unsayable.”

This scenario is not very different from Beckett’s later prose, where a range of mishearing and repetitive action leads to an existence that does not simply coincide with a lived present nor does it make

itself presentable in language.⁴ However, this is unlike any use of the veiled deixis in Beckett's prose, as "*mirlitonades*" by the dint of their voice, poetic economy, and fervent cross rhyme also creates a tonal landscape—one that is the site, the "here," from and in which the voice speaks. In other words, it is the timbre of the voice or its tonal component that bounds the voice to itself if not to any other kind of identity or spatial presence; this is also precisely what the text cannot re-produce. The violence of "there," its oppressive regime of deference and "late"-ness might be "unsaid" or unsayable, yet the voice tries to indicate it and that is its event—the event of voice. In the poem quoted above, the voice does not claim representation over what lies "there," nor does it describe it. Rather, "there" is a vague territory that ironically can be heard much more resonantly in the cross-rhyme of the voice than in the words of the poem.

The rhyme scheme in the first poem is simple *ab, ab*, notwithstanding the slightly jagged rhyme between "led" and "unsaid." Beckett's own recitation practice in Paris, noted in Anne Atik's memoir *How It Was*, was heavily driven by rhyme scheme and "as a rule he pronounced long or short vowels in end-rhymes without regard to their current pronunciation: 'historical rhyme' as against 'eye rhyme'" (54). Even though Atik notes no specific reason why a "historical rhyme" was preferred by Beckett while reciting a range of poetry during private meetings with friends in Paris, it is often given a clear function in "*mirlitonades*": aligning the poems with the idioms of doggerel and light verse.

However, this only resolves half the problem in that it identifies a stylistic element in "*mirlitonades*" that is already announced by its title. The disjunction between the rhyme scheme, its tonal predictability and levity, and the elusive event of language ("unsaid") or identity ("end there"), is a disjunction that resists any explanation except the sound itself. To put it idiomatically, the voice of "*mirlitonades*" abandons only reason but not rhyme. In Beckett's voice one hears what Derrida calls "resonance without signification" in comparison to the Hegelian Klang, which is supposed to be very sound of the spirit.⁵ If the borders between inside and outside are created through deixis, it is also registered through this resonance or through a passing of sound. In "life, late, led" there is a release that each distinct vowel sounds—i, a, e—provides to a consonantal "l" before being foreclosed again by consonants. Similarly, in

the line “where never till then,” one first hears the reversal of “re” into “er,” followed by “en”. These foreclosures are both rewarded in the poem with a rhyme, “unsaid” in the first instance and “when” in the second.

Apart from the rhyme and vowel patterns, there is another kind of resonance that emerges in the poem, one without any clear signification—li la le, do do, id in the first poem and ere, er, en, ay, ere, en from the third line of the second poem. For Matthijs Engelberts the “*étrange musique*” ‘strange music’ of “*mirlitonades*” owes its corrosive force to both its rhyme scheme and its inflated second-person addresses like “thou”; but the real challenge of hearing the voice of “*mirlitonades*” lies in these resonances that cannot be simply inscribed.⁶

Without overstating the role of timbre in Beckett’s work, I would argue that it is in precisely its ability to resonate and produce a buzzing noise that the voice in “*mirlitonades*” marks its event and the event of subjectivity that remains elusive, violent, and unknowable everywhere in Beckett’s work including here. This timbre is not as much a joke or an affected lightness as it has been read in the context of “*mirlitonades*”; rather, it is the only possible inscription of the event of “there.” If in the first poem “there” stands for life, in the second poem it stands for death that does not have any fixed spatial or temporal coordinates. The only fitting response a voice can have to the event of “life late led” or to the event of “end” or death is to speak of it once again but with a shudder, a sonic buzz, and a prickling timbre uniquely its own.

David Nowell Smith’s account of the voice interlinks two very important aspects of timbre, which go to the heart of not just “*mirlitonades*” but to the entirety of Beckett’s poetry starting from “Whoroscope”—the bodily organ that produces timbre and the referential language that accommodates it. Nowell Smith echoes Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of *inflexion* and Derrida’s *tonos* by arguing how the voice is always grasped at “the point of intersection” between “two movements into sound—from out of the vocal organs and from out of the core of the language itself.” Using Barthes’s distinction between “diction” and vocal or verbal elements of verse, Nowell Smith notes that “we also find an analogy between two levels of animation: of this movedness of language, and the dynamization of verse language. The question is to

trace their entanglement, how they fold back against one another, inflect one another” (Nowell Smith 67-68).

This entanglement between bodily voice and systematic language, something already ingrained in Beckett’s early poem, “Whoroscope,” reaches a complexity in “*mirlitonrades*” that one does not encounter in Beckett’s poetry elsewhere. Ripe with rhyme, chiasmus, rhythm, and economical constructions, “*mirlitonrades*” becomes the site—or the instrument if one sticks close to the title—where sound, sense, body, and language, remain deeply entangled. For the Beckett of “*mirlitonrades*” this voice is not produced in a vacuum, it remains tied to the human body, while simultaneously bound by language and its games. Where is timbre in all this one may ask?

Timbre, as the following poem would suggest, is the unique tone that the voice acquires even as the latter remains entangled between body and language. The voice in “*mirlitonrades*” speaks of this unique timbre, as much as it speaks *in* it, in the following poem:

again **gone**
 with what to tell
on again
 retell (222)

Not only does the poem eschew referentiality, in fact it places itself in the exact moment when the object of reference has “again gone” and left the voice behind. The entanglement between body and language is also left asunder as the bodily organ that produces the voice persists, but the object of reference is “gone” or voided itself. Even in this scenario, the voice still “retell[s],” even though only in the second it painfully asked the question: “with what to tell[?]”.

The voice cannot help but go “on” and “retell” its own impoverished condition—a voice still entangled in language, even when it cannot depend on any of the usual strengths of referential language. This is what I have termed timbre in this essay—a retelling that *must* be told, a retelling mobilized by the voice

and a retelling that cannot be a referential retelling. In all of this it is timbre that allows the voice of “*mirlitonades*” to “tell” but not refer, to speak but not describe, and yet operate as a singular poetic event. Timbre in “*mirlitonades*” is not an embellishment or trope, it is rather the structure of poetic voice that persists despite, or rather because, of the failure at hand.

Echoing the oft-quoted quip from “Worstword Ho” concerning failure, here is one of the many couplets from “*mirlitonades*”: “bail bail till better / founder” (221). What sounds like an elongated “er” sound in “better” and “founder” is also the buzzing “er” sound that the poem leaves us with in the end. One founders—the verb for sinking also used in Beckett’s Rimbaud translation—and the poem ends trying to make it “better” but failing.⁷ The trembling “er” in the two lines is what makes audible the limits of poetic form where timbral resonances contribute nothing to the meaning of the poem, and yet try to “bail” it out from its predicament.

Timbre, here or anywhere in “*mirlitonades*,” does not serve as a vehicle for hidden messages or fragmentary pronouncements; it holds no secrets. As such timbre is itself at the limit-point between sound and inscription, or sound and voice. In “*mirlitonades*,” a poem sequence about manipulations and distortions of sound, timbre is the invisible and uncalculated site of transaction between the speaker and the listener. The voice in “*mirlitonades*” murmurs the failure of the speaker, it hums the inability of the subject to access and participate in the given world. The event of the voice is to be able to “tell” this failure and to be able to “retell” its own telling as separate from its silence, with all its timbral repetitions and elisions.

Vibration

“The vibration of language,” notes Nowell Smith, is a “singular articulation, vibration which sets entities into relation with one another, sets speaker into relation with what s/he names, whom s/he addresses, all the while making possible an inexhaustible reserve of new configurations, new meshes, of relation” (76). Mobilized by relations of failure, the voice in “*mirlitonades*” vibrates and oscillates between different tonal material and between varying states of mind and existence:

d'où

la voix qui dit

vis

d'une autre vie (217)

flux cause

que toute chose

tout en étant

toute chose

donc celle-là

même celle-là

tout en étant

n'est pas

parlons-en (213)

My translation: “from where / the voice says / live / an-other life”; “flux causes / things/ to become something / to become anything / so that, let / us say / one both is / and is not / let’s talk about it.”

Beckett uses gerunds throughout the “*mirlitonades*,” including in the lines above, giving the fragments a flexible neutrality similar to that of a Greek middle voice. This middle voice in “*mirlitonades*,” however, does not ever attain a place of neutral observation and commentary. Instead of speaking from a place of rest, bearing stability, the voice in the poem fluctuates, as the two poems above reveal, between identity and non-identity, and between self and otherness. While the voice in the first poem itself raises the question of its origin, by asking “*d'où*,” the second poem makes the fluctuation between being and non-being its primary subject. In both the poems, the voice vibrates with the knowledge of its own

insufficiency, while also acknowledging the “flux” and the “*autre*” that is structurally bound to this voice. The “*voix*” answers its own questions of origins, by suggesting, or rather commanding, its listener to “*vis*”—the second-person imperative form: ‘live!’

A neutral place, accorded to the Greek middle voice, is an impossibility in “*mirlitonades*,” which is always addressed to an external receiver while at the same time undercutting the internal source it emerges from, if it does. The question in the first poem—“*d’où*” or ‘from where?’— is most likely addressed to someone outside “*la voix*,” but in the next lines the same voice externalizes itself to answer the question. This response almost coincides the speaker with the listener, perpetrating the same myth of immediacy that Derrida warns about regarding timbre, except the listener in the poem is likened to “*autre vie*” or another life. Even if the speaking voice is addressing itself— “*vis*”—it still remains severed by the charge of “*autre vie*.”

Thus, the Beckettian voice in “*mirlitonades*” openly challenges the monologue form or the neutral middle voice by speaking of the wedge that will always keep the speaker and the listener apart. Ultimately, the short four-line poem leaves the reader with neither a determinate listener, who is not simply “*autre vie*,” nor a determinate speaker, who does not make any clear claims about possessing the voice it speaks in.⁸ All one hears in the poem is voice, which is first spoken and then heard, but it is neither attached clearly to a speaker nor to a listener. It is the difference between “*vis*” and “*autre vie*,” or the vibration between “*vis*” and “*autre vie*,” that gives it life.

This unconditional difference between the self and other, between the interior and the exterior, is the event of voice in “*mirlitonades*.” It is most boldly identified in the poem, quoted above, that upholds “flux” as the very process that brings “*toute chose*” or ‘everything’ into “*étant*” or ‘being.’ The process does not end there, and as the poem goes on to identify, this being is also further changed back into “*toute chose*” or ‘everything.’ In the last two lines, where the poem tries to ease the distinction between “*étant*” or ‘being’ and “*toute chose*” or ‘everything,’ one does not find a unity but rather a reintroduction of “flux.” The poem suggests that the “*chose*” or ‘thing’ is both something and anything in the same instance, thus making “flux” not simply a process of change or becoming but the very peel of difference

that can be heard in the coincidence of opposite ends. It is this flux or vibration that one hears in the voice in “*mirlitonrades*.” Lawrence Harvey’s famous statement on Beckett’s poetry that it does not reject all form but rather “stops short of total formlessness” (63), points toward this very flux.

Formlessness, however, does not affect Beckett’s poetic project by itself or in isolation. As suggested in the poem from “*mirlitonrades*” above, any idea of formlessness remains tied to “*étant*” or in other words, form. If the timbre of *mirliton* plays an important role in displacing the poetic voice, adding a tonal buzz to it, the vibration in both sound and form creates a trembling movement in the poem that is waged not at the level of tone or pitch but at the level of voice. This voice, as one hears in the poems quoted above, shudders and move away from any kind of auto-affectation, instead finding its event in the difference between form and formlessness, and between self and itself.

It would not be an overstatement then to say that this gesture made in “*mirlitonrades*,” along with similar gestures made in the poems of Celan, Hopkins or Baudelaire,⁹ upends one of the most persistent philosophical assumptions about the voice. As Nowell Smith points out, in the long history of Western metaphysics, human voice has often been understood as a flattening of bodily space. This generally leads to the assumption that the rich interiority one carries within oneself, with all its schisms, is something that can be flattened to the production of voice. Putting it in terms of a metonymy between voice and inner life, Nowell Smith writes: “Voice, then, indicates the current state of our inner life, but more fundamentally indicates the very fact that we *have* an inner life” (56). However, a gesture such as “*mirlitonrades*” challenges this complicity, not by divorcing voice from inner life altogether—not that something of the kind is possible—but rather suggesting that this voice despite remaining contiguous to inner life is not subsumed in it.

The voice in Beckett’s poem does not banish life altogether, but nor does it identify with it; instead it occupies the space of contradiction. It is this space that Nowell Smith identifies with vibration, writing: “Voice serves as the embodiment of a contradictory non-identical identity: it is less that voice is ‘deconstructed’ by the attentively anti-metaphysical critic than that it serves as locus for that *event*, or *movement*, that at a certain point in his career Derrida named ‘deconstruction’” (58; emphasis added).

Thus, the voice is an embodiment of difference or contradiction, and not its signifier. As is the case with “*mirlitonades*,” the failure of voice to identify itself or its source cannot not simply be *read* in the poem. This failure is rather the very locus of the voice and its event in “*mirlitonades*.”

Nowell Smith, reading Derrida and Nancy, identifies poetic form in general with this “vibrational difference” that bestows upon the voice a non-identifiable identity. This identity, for Nowell Smith, operates, among other things, through a “plural-voicing” (54). He writes in the context of Hardy’s poetry, “through its competing intonational cues, its mutually exclusive vocal attitudes and vocal lines, it demands of us plural voicings” (54). This plurality of voice in “*mirlitonades*” is extended, ironically, through repetition. One is made to register the difference or vibration in Beckett’s poem, not through a juxtaposition of non-identical as is the case in Hardy, but through almost an instrumental repetition of the same.

The following poem, originally written in French and self-translated by Beckett later as part of “*mirlitonades*,” is dedicated to the interruptive power of death:

Là
 [...]

 go where never before

 no sooner there than there always

 no matter where never before

 no sooner there than there always (223)

The voice here repeats its claim about death— “no sooner there than there always”— while being firmly rooted in life. The distinction between the place from which the voice declares its injunction— “go where never before”— and the place in which it has “never” been, which I am referring to as death, are both equally absent from the poem. The place that the voice has “never before” been to cannot be legibly

spoken about in the poem since one technically cannot have any insight into this place, and the place the voice speaks *from* is diminished by the poem's sole focus on going to this other place.

One hears in this poem, as in other instances in "*mirlitonades*" mentioned above, the quivering vibration of a voice that finds itself entangled between here and there, life and death, being able to speak of neither and the Beckettian imperative to speak of both. However, this entangled, pluralistic, state in "*mirlitonades*" is spoken through repetition, using the self-same phrase, as in the above poem— "where never before" in the first and third line and "no sooner there than there always" in the second and fourth line. Notice from the peculiar use of "than" in the second and fourth line, which introduces comparison, thus more possibilities, rather than causality. In the very line that is repeated Beckett introduces plurality by setting up a comparison between those who "go where never before" and those that were already "there always." Thus, the voice finds itself repeating a claim about a place it has never been and a place that may be inhabited by those on behalf of whom the voice cannot speak. The event of voice in this poem, and in "*mirlitonades*" in general, is to be able to withstand this multiplicity without breaking or passing into silence.

Another modernist poem, Eugenio Montale's "Delta," translated by Beckett into English, repeats the same gesture of drifting aimlessly toward something one has no presentiment of. But in Montale's poem the unknown is given a sound— a "whistle" of a tugboat:

[...]
 Of thee
 I know nothing, only
 the tidings sustaining my going,
 and shall I find
 thee shape or the fumes of a dream
 drawing life
 from the river's fever boiling darkly against the tide.

Of thee nothing in the grey hours and the hours
 torn by a flame of sulphur,
 only
 the whistle of the tug
 whose prow has ridden forth into the bright gulf. (Beckett, *Collected Poems* 63)

Unconcerned about the destination, Montale's speaker is more troubled by the force that moves it toward a "bright gulf." The poem dramatizes the movement or "goings" of the speaker that has left the shore and addresses itself to an invisible and unknowable force that moves it. Beckett's injunction to "go where never before" is in fact directed at someone like the voice in Montale's poem, who takes the "the whistle of the tug" as an imperative to keep going. Beckett's poem deliberately does not exteriorise this movement. By giving voice an event outside of itself like the "whistle of the tug," Montale's poem despite "drawing life / from the river's fever boiling darkly," allows the voice to describe the "bright gulf" as something that has entered the speaker's line of vision.

For Beckett the struggle between the place from which the voice speaks and the place that it could "go" toward remains throughout the poem just that — a struggle. The failure is never "recuperated" or as Wheatley points out specifically in the context of "*mirlitonades*," "these poems have dramatized the painful struggle forward, physical and verbal, of the speaker out of darkness towards the light, no less than the *failure* with which it is invariably met" (62; emphasis added). It is this "struggle" that is never entirely externalized or interiorized, and is thus a vibration, that Beckett's voice takes for its event.

Conclusion

Anne Atik's memoir catalogues a variety of incidents where Beckett recited poetry for his close friends or voiced his opinions about poetry in general or about contemporary poets. One such incident that Atik

writes about is from 1974, where during dinner Beckett is reported to have said, “Poetry. That intractable beast. An untamed horse. A wild animal one has to ride” before going on to recite “Apollinaire, like a chant: ‘*Voie lactée*’” (Atik 40). This chanting quality to Beckett’s recitation is something that Atik testifies to throughout her memoir, referring to it as “crooning” and opposed to the usual “French declamation,” is a quality germane to the writing of “*mirlitonrades*.” A chant is the repetition of a rhythmic phrase, an inscription that is inherently open to voice, a form that begets action through speech. This is what one of the final verses in “*mirlitonrades*” attempts to do, despite failing:

on whence
 no sense
 but on
 to whence
 but on
 no sense
 so on
 no whence
 no sense (222)

Like several other small fragments in “*mirlitonrades*,” the poem begins with an indication of movement, “on.” This movement, however, is immediately overturned with interrogative clause, “whence,” asking the listener where it comes from (or in fact where it is headed). Again, presuming that the voice is also its own listener, and to itself it is making the confession of “no sense,” any journey onward seems senseless, if not impossible. The next lines in the poem seems to repeat the same sentiment but with a playful chiasmus that one associates with all parts of “*mirlitonrades*.” The contrasting clause—“but”—splits the predicament of the voice into two: first, moving onward senselessly, and second, moving onward to a place that is without sense. Either way, the poem does not bestow any sense upon this

movement, nor does it take itself to this place without sense. Like the rest of “*mirlitonrades*,” the voice in the poem, despite being tonally rich and remaining entirely coherent, does not produce for the reader/listener any determinate position of interiority or exteriority, nor does it give them an insight into self or the world. If anything, “*mirlitonrades*” militates against any such production of meaning, persisting in the timbre, the vibration of its aural event, resisting any restitution in truth, certainty or knowledge.

The poetic event of “*mirlitonrades*” echoes in full Derrida’s claim that poetry “*lets itself* be done, without activity, without work, in the most sober *pathos*, a stranger to all production, especially to creation” (*Che Cos* 233). Even though Derrida makes this claim about all poetry and all poetic form, the voice in “*mirlitonrades*” is singular in the way it manages to bypass the demands of “production” and “creation” but continues to persist so aggressively in tone and vibration. There are many modern poems that rail against the productive aspect of language, Guillaume Apollinaire’s “Zone” being one of them, but not many reduce the poetic voice to a mere tremor devoid of all its referential capacity. Here is the final stanza from Apollinaire’s landmark poem in Beckett’s translation:

You walk towards Auteuil you want to walk home and sleep

Among your fetishes from Guinea and the South Seas

Christs of another creed another guise

The lowly Christs of dim expectancies

Adieu Adieu

Sun corseless head (*Collected Poems* 149)

Apollinaire’s long poem gives a postcard-like snippet of all the places or “zones” that his second-person speaker has travelled through, only finding themselves further alienated from the landscape through

which they pass and diligently describe. The final “adieu” here does not signal a separation or rest but only further exhaustion, as it is only the “Christ of dim expectancies” that awaits the speaker even in its most private moment.

To conclude, I believe Beckett’s “*mirlitonades*” emerges from a space where “Zone” draws to a close — “sun corseless head.” Its object or its “zone” is not in the geographical spaces that Beckett or his speaker travels through but in the very place from where poetry emerges: “*la voix*” or ‘the voice.’ The voice is the event of “*mirlitonades*,” and adapting Waltham-Smith’s argument about timbre, the voice in the poem is “hollow” yet “it is often what hits us and overpowers us” (16). Waltham-Smith concludes that “it [timbre] is the compulsive repetition of limit-experiences, the repercussions of transgression. For deconstruction, timbre is the jouissance of philosophy” (16). As “*mirlitonades*” passes a human voice through a *mirliton*, what emerges on the other side is the limit experience of the voice—its failures and its eventful jouissance.

Notes

1

For a brief genealogy of rhymeries in Beckett's early and late work, see Nixon (2006).

2

For a detailed drafting history of the "mirlitonnades," see van Hulle (2019).

³ Reading these traces, Nixon points how both footsteps and writing in Beckett's work are conceptualized as acts that leave traces.

4

See *Ill Seen, Ill Said* for Beckett's use mishearing, speech errors, and optical illusions.

5

For a more detailed account of Hegel's klang, or the sound of bell that for Hegel was the very origin of spirit, see Döbereiner, "Resonances of Subjectivity."

6

Engelberts (1998) attributes the strange music of "mirlitonnades" to irregular couplets and slightly less irregular tercets in the sequence.

7

"May I split from stem to stern and founder, ah founder!" (Rimbaud, *Drunken Boat*, tr. Samuel Beckett, *Collected Poems*66).

8

See Derrida's comments on poetic address in *Che cos' è la poesia?* and a speaker's claims on possessing the voice in which it speaks.

⁹ For a detailed account of voice in the work of these poets, see Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry*.

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