

# Waste Articulated: Derrida via Beckettian WATT

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Beckett's *Watt* reads as follows:

on the waste, beneath the sky, distinguished by Watt as being, the one above, the other beneath, Watt. That before him, behind him, on all sides of him, there was something else, neither sky nor waste, was not felt by Watt. And it was always their long dark flowing away together towards the mirage of union that lay before him, whichever way he turned. The sky was of a dark colour, from which it may be inferred that the usual luminaries were absent. They were. The waste also, needless to say, was of a dark colour. Indeed the sky and the waste were of the same dark colour, which is hardly to be wondered at. Watt also was very naturally of the same dark colour. This dark colour was so dark that the colour could not be identified with certainty.

Sometimes it seemed a dark absence of colour, a dark mixture of all colours, a dark white. But Watt did not like the words dark white, so he continued to call his darkness a dark colour plain and simple, which strictly speaking it was not, seeing that the colour was so dark as to defy identification as such.

The source of the feeble light diffused over this scene is unknown.

Further peculiarities of this soul-landscape were:

The temperature was warm.

Beneath Watt the waste rose and fell.

All was silent.

Above Watt the sky fell and rose.

Watt was rooted to the spot.<sup>1</sup>

If articulation, *arthron*, passage, is always a rupture of continuity, thus becoming the potentiality to not-be and if the broken unity is treated as constitution of unexpected dis-position, the thinking of articulation "goes through a thinking of *place* [*lieu*], as a place or locus that is reduced neither to objective extension nor to objective space."<sup>2</sup> Since there exists no passage between signification and ostensive gesture without pre-reference to the very taking place of any relation, one can ask about the place of a single subject which never designates itself and never "relate itself to itself as subject."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, what seems crucial at that point is: what would be the figurativeness of any experience as singular being already divided in itself without possible self-relation? What would be the very of any experience as an exposure to difference?

Watt articulates the difference between the waste, the sky and the self, remaining however within the very act of experiencing the difference: articulation as experience constitutes the presumed sense in terms of an object. This, however, is not in accord with phenomenological objectification – the object is not a product of intentional perception and the word uttered is not the one postulated as "recognized through all possible gestures."<sup>4</sup> It is not always the same realization of materiality of a sign but a word of pure experience already mediated through being articulated. Resistant to any reduction, the language marks the opening of possibility to not-be – thy waste/sky distance occupied by Watt indicates semiological spacing within which no ultimate semantic relation is possible and which rules out the possibility of passage between the semiotic and the semantic. Contingency of reality expressed in linguistic form does not function as an immediate experi-

ence: the ideality of an object that "reverberates in the ideality of the expression and in that of its sense"<sup>5</sup> is no longer a phenomenological adherence, on the contrary, it undermines its own foundation in the facticity of being articulated and of taking place. Embodied in the sensible, the embodiment itself substitutes the unlocated and untemporal being-of-sense. Sense becomes sensual. What is more, the fact that cannot be reduced to its phenomenological sense ceases to function within the primordial unity of sense and fact, as Husserl postulates, but exists within the concrete *apriori*. At the same time ideality of meaning becomes a predicate of experience – temporalized and spatialized within passive synthesis of time. There being no presence but for retentional-protentional delineations as *dynamic* potentiality to no-be, the sensible substrate of the Watean waste can be preconstituted only as material element of concrete actuality, already formed as momentary deferral in its sense. At this point phenomenological constitution of "the mirage of union" within existential experience turns out to exceed the primordial and final sense of any object constitution. Although, assuming that "indication is the category within which language refers to its own taking place"<sup>6</sup>, deixis not only indicates the taking place of a discourse but – doing so – undermines its own taking place. This paradoxical double negation takes possession of sense: without the possibility of negation no constitution and no experience could take place. Here the Nancy'ean statement: "we *touch* the origin"<sup>7</sup> as experiencing the dis-position of the world can be inscribed within the impossibility of phenomenological constitution and can explain the Watean waste in terms of dis-placement inherent to every "being singular-plural" (Nancy). The pure present of the "it happens" is no longer attainable: the "it happens" must be already delayed since diverging from the possible locus. Dis-placement presupposes distancing through opening any interval, or upspring of the event as unrepresentable. "In this sense – Nancy concludes – it exceeds the resources of any phenomenology, even though the phenomenological theme in general has never been more magnetized by anything else."<sup>8</sup> How then to articulate the difference between nothing and something?

Adopting the poetic imagery of the placement displaced – "beneath Watt waste rose and fell/ above Watt the sky fell and rose" – it becomes clearly visible that the presence of negation constitutes act of the very constitution and thus founds every predication and intentional act. The "present is at the same time negation and assimilation of the past moment in retention; it is because this retention itself is immediately of a piece with a protention that preserves and denies the present as future in the past, because all the movements of intentionality are constituted by this dialectic of time, that negation appears here as what essentially animates every genesis."<sup>9</sup> With existential passage of time experienced, its passivity inherent to any sense constitution, Watt seems an existential figure whose intentional acts reverberate throughout dis-position of sense. Moreover, it is in the Watean figure that being – intermingled with actual possibility to not-be – marks traces of all possible signification: figurative and temporally formed.

The Wattean space – neither dark nor light – differentiates the dark from the light, itself becoming a point of departure which, however being a point of any possible referentiality, enters into the realm of im-possible self-referentiality. Nameless or unnamable, the landscape of sky/waste overlapping or intermingling, or (which is the same) of the space unfolding and folding itself, becomes a sign of an access – of some surplus signification that cannot touch any signified object. This sign of excess, this excessive sign, still signifies somehow, at least “by means of this angle, this fold, this doubled fold of an undecidable, a mark that marks both the marked and the mark.”<sup>10</sup> Self-referentiality of the term, its reference to the very act of relation between sound (visual image, here, the sky/waste reference) and sense (heterogeneity within homogenous landscape of the sky and the waste spaces) is both necessary and impossible, thus – aporetic.

Going back to the medieval distinction between *intention prima* (where a sign signifies an object intended) and *intention secunda* (where a sign signifies *intention prima*) and discussing a derridean notion of a trace as an aporetic figure, Agamben posits a question: how is it possible to signify something without turning it into an object intended? How is it possible for a sign to refer to *standing for* without any objective referent present in the act of reference? In order to avoid objectification of *intention*, the *intention* must not be neither present nor absent, but it must exceed its own reference while functioning as an excessive figure whose sense is never given or presumed. The moment of the sign *referring to* or *standing for* must not itself be transposed into *intention*, otherwise it would lose its signifying power, instead, the very moment must function as a trace of im-possible signification, the trace being neither concept nor object.

“Trace” – Agamben writes – names precisely this extinguishable instance of *repraesentamen* in every presence, this excess of signification in all sense. To turn the terms of medieval logic, there can be neither an *intention prima* nor *intention secunda*; every intention is always *secundo-prima* or *primo-secunda*, such that in it intentionality always exceeds intent and signification always anticipates and survives the signified.<sup>11</sup>

According to Agamben, the deconstructive paradox of a “trace”, can be seen as a different name for Fregean paradox of the concept “horse” (“Object and Concept”, 1892) which, in fact, is not a concept since, every time we refer to it in the expression “the concept ‘horse’ is not a concept”, the concept having been named starts functioning as an object. This paradox expresses the more general idea that once a term refers to something, it cannot refer to the fact of its referring to: *intention* functions as or rather becomes an *intentionum*. Hence the space of potential sense – once being a signifying point of reference to the very moment of signification, becomes impossible *intentionum* itself and undergoes objectification.

Perceiving his own perception, Watt is put within the space of his own passivity, or inability to name the form of the experience. Through materializing Aristotle’s potentiality, this experience affirms the impact of its own formlessness within some actualization of potentiality (impotentiality). The topology of experiencing the form affirms nothing more than the typology of sign taking place between *intention* and the *intentionum*, in the process of naming and signification:

The aporias of self-reference thus do not find their solution here; rather, they are dislocated and (according to Platonic suggestion) transformed into *euporias*. The name

can be named and language can be brought to speech, because self-reference is displaced onto the level of potentiality; what is intended is neither the word as object nor the word insofar as it *actually* denotes a thing, but, rather, a pure potential to signify (and to not signify) ... . But it is no longer meaning’s self-reference, a sign’s signification of itself; instead, it is the materialization of a potentiality, the materialization of its own possibility.<sup>12</sup>

Deictic in character, the reality of signification is the reality of discourse: elliptically pointing at its own moment of actualization, it actualizes the impotentiality of meaning. Inscribed within this discursive structure of signification, the Wattean space composed around waste the and the sky materializes paradoxical character of sign: dark color, absence of color and dark white accompanied by Watt himself being undistinguishable from the scene, appear as such from within the possible relation between sound/the visual and sense. The possibility to-not be – which, in fact, means im-possibility actualized – can be traced in Watt’s perception of imperception, “the sensation of an *anaesthesia*, a pure taking place (in which truly nothing takes place other than place).”<sup>13</sup> Referring to itself, the im-perception (possibility of non-perception) as *intention* is no longer self-referential act, but becomes objectified and temporalized. Since the waste and the sky seem constituted on the same vertical level which – when actualized in the process of signification – turns into a vertical one, they become incorporated into the Wattean figure which, at the same time (there is never the same time or any simultaneity), marks the un-marked traces of their being fold. Namely, there being no ultimate correspondence between the signified and the signifying, the sign is spatiality of a possible relation, or spacing within signification. The name itself – Watt – possess no internal sense, which makes him a figure of semantic void: the sound sounding like a question and referring to itself (as the *intentionum*) within *intention*, empties itself of any potential sense. All this results in the dissolution of the distinctive features of the scene, they taking a shape of trace-like concepts where a border-line between a sound and (non)sense is a limit of the very difference enabling any sign to appear.

This all boils down to the question: what is the place of negativity in the articulation of sound potentially endowed with sense? If the space round Watt is distinguished from Watt and if spacing precedes any space, where is the place of the articulation of sense as an integral element of sign? Supposing that the Wattean waste is inseparable from the Wattean sky, whereas the formless waste means some surplus of sense (its being of dark color, light color or colorless) prescribed to it, the very taking place of language overlaps the experience of nonorigin of this taking place. Already named, the waste and the sky, lose their significant power and remain merely “empirical marks”:

the trace is not only the disappearance of the origin ... it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin ... . that concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no ordinary trace.<sup>14</sup>

Before indication being “a category within which language refers to its own taking place”<sup>15</sup>, it must be articulated somehow, which means its taking place as a discourse – the very discourse, however, is no longer just an indicative event of language, but the spacing between possible sides within the signifying relation. Watt – in existential relation to the space he is placed in (“rooted to the spot”) – is an indexical figure before being able to put any distinction

within the space itself. This Jakobsonian notion of the sign / as being in existential relation with its object has been radicalized here: it is not only existentially related to its utterance and hence functions as an index, but it is primarily marked by its possibility to-not pronounce /.

/ means the person uttering / – Jakobson defines – Thus, on the one hand, the sign / cannot represent its object without being associated with the latter “by a conventional rule,” and in different codes the same meaning is assigned to different sequences such as /, *ego*, *ich*, *ja*, etc. Consequently / is a symbol. On the other hand, the sign / cannot represent its object without “being in existential relation” with this object: the word / designating the utterer is existentially related to his utterance, and hence functions as an index.<sup>16</sup>

However, the Jakobsonian notion of the sign / “being in existential relation with its object” does not account for the negativity of the fact as the space of differentiation between the indexicality of the sign and of the object this sign refers to. Before the existential relation there must be existentiality of the very relation in terms of its taking place, which means its traces inscribed within what is said in the instance of discourse. Pure meaning (*voler-dire*) remains impossible, the structure of linguistic sign as a mark of the unmarked difference between sound and sense. Moreover, the conceptualization of the relation between the sign and its object – with possible sense constitution – verges on its own impossible actuality resulting from the fact that the concept of *relation* is not a concept when actualized. The Augustinian idea that the word uttered (a *vox*) as a dead word is “no longer mere sound ... but not yet a signification – insofar as it is the experience, that is, of a sign as pure meaning [*voler-dire*] and intention to signify before

and beyond the arrival of every particular signification”<sup>17</sup> can no longer be justified. Intention to signify always points through a deictic gesture at itself, thus excluding purity of any referentiality: the word uttered as a dead word and neither mere sound nor yet signification, becomes *intentio* inseparable from its *intantum*, still displaced outside pure referentiality and meaning awaiting for disclosure.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, (Grove Press: New York ), p. 249.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, transl. R. Richardson, A. O’Byrne (Stanford UP 2000), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry. An Introduction* (University of Nebraska Press 1989), p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, transl. K. Pinkus, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 78 (University of Minnesota Press 1991), p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy, J.-L., *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy*, transl. M. Hobson (The University of Chicago Press 2003), p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida [in:] G. Agamben, *Potentialities* (Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 211.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1976), p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death. The Place of Negativity*, trans. K. Pinkus (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Jakobson, „Shifters, verbal categories and the Russian verb”, *Selected Writings*, vol.2 (The Hague, 1971), p. 132.

<sup>17</sup> Agamben, *The End of Poem*, transl. d. Heller-Roazen (Stanford UP, 1999), p. 64.