

THE POSTMODERN SEARCH FOR (NON)IDENTITY: W. GOLDING'S MASKS AND S. BECKETT'S SELF-ANNIHILATION

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The prismatic issue of identity has lain at the core of many creations all along the endless path drawn by literature. Writers have exploited various types of identity: individual or self identity, national identity, linguistic identity, social identity, religious identity, political identity etc. Beside literary books themes like identity theft, economic identity, judiciary identity have been studied and thoroughly analysed in multiple contexts. However, in order to understand what each sort refers to you have to have a clear definition of the term and a representative example to illustrate it.

Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary offers the following explanations of *identity*:

"1. state or fact of remaining the same one, as under varying aspects or conditions (identity of finger prints); 2. the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another (to doubt one's identity); 3. condition or characteristic as to who a person or what a thing is (a case of mistaken identity); 4. state or fact of being the same one; 5. exact likeness in nature or qualities (identity of interests); 6. an instance or point of sameness or likeness (to mistake resemblances for identities)" [10:707].

The seventh definition refers to the field of mathematics and has little in common with the subject that concerns us.

Postmodernists seem to have shed more light on the vast area of identity as they proved more interested in researching the depths of the self and its flaws. Golding and Beckett stand among those who enlarged this theme and approached it from different angles: *hidden and troubled identity* on the one hand, and *dissolution and anonymity* on the other hand. The books referred to are William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Samuel Beckett's trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*.

Golding's plot is apparently simple: a group of school boys on a deserted island have to choose between

civilisation and barbarism; they split and begin to hunt one another. Still, at a deeper level things are more complex. The real battle is given between the two chiefs in charge: Ralph and Jack, the rest of the characters are only supporters of their actions. They gradually destroy their civilised habits and evolve towards a state of sheer savageness. During this process they - especially Jack - undergo a change of personality.

They both put on *masks*; Ralph becomes the organiser who has the right to speak over the others because he possesses a big conch he has found on the beach. He does not change much, but is forced to switch places by Jack. He turns from chief and hunter into subdued and hunted.

Jack is the character who causes the action and supports it. He is also the one who proves to have a *double personality*: the civilised and the barbarian under the same hat. His *troubled identity* puts all the boys that revolve around him in jeopardy.

The button of Jack's darker side is pushed by Ralph (assisted by Piggy) who does not agree with him, who can think for himself and wants to preserve his position in the group. Ralph can and intends to continue living as civilised people do, but Jack's ideas enjoy more support from the part of the other school boys and thus, he becomes more powerful. This causes his *educated mask* to slip and be replaced by another.

The new mask Jack takes on brings about a *change of identity* and consequently a change of views,

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behaviour and attitude. He becomes a *savage hunter* who does not only look for beasts to kill, but also for his former allies for the same purpose. What is almost unbelievable in all of this is that not one of his group thinks that what they are doing is wrong and that they should stop. Their mischievous, cruel and pagan way of acting defeats their education in every sense of the word, once they are no longer provided for.

Golding uses here two types of *masks*, in order to give a more complex profile to his characters. Thus, he 'embellishes' them on the one hand with an internal, imperceptible, *psychological mask* - they have to think and act as adults - and on the other hand, with a *physical mask* created with the help of paint. As a result, just as in the Carnival of Venice, you do no longer know who is who. The only thing that preserves its identity is their name.

Golding deals superficially with *the decomposition of the self*, as he is not interested in erasing his characters, but rather in 'advertising' their darker side. Thus, he only operates a *shallow decomposition*, that of his characters' civilised self which falls apart when challenged by the strict conditions of the island. Consequently, Jack is not the only one who gives in; his entire crew do too and their faulty decision is even more serious as they become the force which supports Jack's actions and supplies him with all the power he needs to turn the paradise into hell.

The involution of the main character is very differently presented in Beckett's novels. In the first part you have the impression that Molloy is soon going to die and then something more exciting will happen. Nothing of the kind. Molloy goes through a confusing stage of remembering things past. He is not sure of anything, thinks that his mother passed away and that he has a son, but all this might as well be the product of his imagination. He is thus an unreliable narrator.

His identity is *blurred* from the very beginning. However, the more he immerses in narration, the more his identity fades away. He seems to fight to get rid of his *self* through telling stories; stories that he hopes are real, but does not really care if they are. Molloy is in fact trying so hard to get acquainted with his readers that he totally messes things up.

The absurd of Beckett's theatre invades his novels too, but under an improved form. You get the impression that you are placed behind a curtain of fog and that this is the reason for your not understanding what is going on; whereas in his plays the lack of logic is obvious.

Molloy, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* are all anti-

quest novels or novels in which the main characters evolve towards their *self-annihilation*. The four parts of the trilogy include various manners of focusing on the influential relationship between *the conditions in which the characters live* and *their identities*.

For example, one of them, Molloy - if you take into account his stories - has lived an obscure life, highly miserable and promiscuous sometimes. He meets one of his lovers, Ruth or Edith, at the garbage cans. He does not show any obvious sign of deploring that stage of his life. He finds it quite ordinary and does not realise that he has been changed by it. His living conditions have deeply influenced him, alienated his ego and caused an *identity crisis*. As a consequence, he is no longer sure of anything; he floats through foggy events that happened to him in reality or in his imagination.

"I don't know. The truth is I don't know much. For example my mother's death. Was she really dead when I came? Or did she only die later? I mean enough to bury. I don't know. Perhaps they haven't buried her yet. In any case I have her room. I sleep in her bed. I piss and shit in her pot. I have taken her place. I must resemble her more and more. All I need now is a son. Perhaps I have one somewhere. But I think not (...) It seems to me sometimes that I even knew my son, that I helped him. Then I tell myself it's impossible." [2:9]. Molloy has serious identity trouble. He is not only old, cripple, retarded, but his masculinity is also negated. A critic even made a parallel between his name and Joyce's Molly. He is reduced in fact to the condition of a vegetable with sudden sparkles of philosophical reasoning.

The Beckettian creation is all the more interesting as the narrator invented by the author hides behind a number of masks and thus, deliberately *runs from his identity* and from the reader's curiosity. By *deconstructing* his character's personality Beckett probably tries to prove that, devoid of it they are nothing. It is their identity which defines them, which causes their choices and finally supports their lives. Without it no one can actually know them because there is nothing to know. The lack of it leads them to isolation, loneliness, disintegration.

All that remains of Beckett's characters are bodies without identity, skeleton-like figures, as Gaëtan Picon chose to call them. They *decay* gradually from all points of views: physically, mentally, adding schizoid implications to the trilogy the moment they confess having been confined to a jar. This jar is their head, the only place where something obviously

happens. However, they experience an utter impulse of pushing away the walls of the jar and gaining freedom.

Paul Davies, in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett* talks about the perception flaws of Descartes' well known words: *Cogito ergo sum*. He tries to point out that to think is not enough in order to prove that you exist and adds the explanation of the physicist Fritjof Capra, who underlined the fact that the mind should not be separated from the body as it is an integrant part of it [4:45]:

"Descartes' famous sentence *Cogito ergo sum* - I think, therefore I exist - has led Western man equate his identity with his mind, instead of with his whole organism. As a consequence of the Cartesian division, most individuals are aware of themselves as isolated individual egos existing inside their bodies. The mind has been separated from the body and given the futile task of controlling it, thus causing an apparent conflict between the conscious will and the involuntary instincts (...) this inner fragmentation of man mirrors his view of the world 'outside' which is seen as a multitude of separate objects and events."

Davies thinks further that Beckett's narrators are not only isolated from their environment, but also from their own organism. As a result, there is no other possible answer to the question *What am I?* but, "I am a thinking machine whose disintegration is inevitable and utterly gratuitous." [4:45].

One of the conclusions that you may draw from Davies' reasoning is that your identity is incomplete unless you share your thoughts, feelings, knowledge with the others. "The very moment the external world is shut out, the 'cogitator' is *shut in*. The enclosure is complete, the jar, its perfect symbol, is in place, with its victim inside." [4:52].

The prison of Golding's characters is the island where they have to survive until someone comes to their rescue. Just as Beckett's characters destroy their ability to remember, their brain, their skull, their prison, Golding's set their prison on fire. It seems to be a sort of foolish revenge they take on the alleged causes of their misfortunes. Still, the Beckesian trilogy heroes do not have their memory completely wiped out, and they definitely do not do it deliberately, they rather discover that the real cause of all their disabilities is the 'disability' of the language to express their ideas. They touch upon the Saussurian distinction between sign and meaning. The arbitrary relation that exists between the two is the reason of their apparently senseless stream of consciousness. Molloy feels its shade as he bitterly states: "even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate..." [2:30].

Nonetheless Golding's material is far away from this perspective as it lacks focused linguistic-philosophical depth. He is more interested in day to day issues such as the inner evil or the heart of darkness. His novel pictures, as McCarron [7:5] underlines, "a microcosm of the adult world, which is also destroying itself." What is most suggestive is that the identity of the whole human race is symbolised by the group of English boys.

Once there are two *antagonistic identities* the conflict will sooner or later burst. In this story the basic opposition lies between Jack and Piggy, as the former is perceived in terms of the powerful sly ruler and the latter in terms of the weak honest subject. There is however a 'small' difference between them, which causes the balance to tilt in Piggy's direction: he is smarter than Jack. The relationship existing between the two is highly symbolic of the relationship existing between powerful aggressive people and powerless clever people. Once the powerful acknowledge their intellectual inferiority, the powerless must be acquainted with their superior feature: their aggressivity. Sometimes, as in Piggy's case, this ends up tragically.

Beckett's characters also end tragically, as they gradually evolve towards a state of self-annihilation. However, the *microcosm-macrocosm identity* is differently dealt with in the trilogy. Both Molloy and Malone brood thoroughly over this subject, but Molloy is rather more preoccupied with linguistic shortcomings. Thus Malone is the only one who reaches the stage of identifying his little world with the bigger one. Davies gives you some clues about this process:

"In the consciousness of liberation we are returned to the ancient concept of Pythagoras, Plotinus, Paracelsus, Böhme, Coleridge and George Russell, to name six exponents of the *philosophia perennis* - a perspective in which the human ('little man') is in the image of the cosmos ('great man') and in which the problem of self and world is explained thus: the microcosm (human) is neither separate from nor other than the macrocosm (deity); it is merely distinguished and individuated by its mode of manifestation, just like the hand of a person or the leaf of a tree" [4:55-56]. Malone's flow of thoughts is more specific, according to Davies' explanation, because he has his eyes closed and describes the picture formed in his mind. He establishes thus a close relation between sea, earth, waves and shore and obtains *a deep identity between*

his self, his surroundings and the cosmos.

"(...) the eyes stare into the space before them, namely the fullness of the great deep with its unchanging calm (...). But at long intervals they close, (...). And perhaps it is then he sees the heaven of the old dream, the heaven of the sea and of the earth too, and the spasm of the waves from shore to shore all stirring to their tiniest stir, and the so different motion of men for example, who are no tied together, but free to come and go as they please." [2:214].

The issue of freedom may nonetheless turn into an intricate problem, as it happens with the choir boys on the island. Being free to do what they want they choose violence instead of trying to patch things up between them. In this respect Golding establishes a subtle link between violence and the boys' *religious identity*. As they represent a religious institution, they should have favoured peace and mutual understanding instead of violence and killing. But, as it is, Piggy gets killed and Ralph is smoked out of the woods. The conclusion of this serious 'regress' of events is concentrated in the naval officer's final remark [5:192]:

"I should have thought that a pack of British boys - you're all British aren't you? - would have been able to put up a better show than that!"

The powerful allusions to World War II supported by adults can easily be felt in this last reply. The boys realise that they encouraged their earlier misconduct, but the only one who assumes his responsibility for it is Ralph. Jack does not dare say what he planned. He is in fact the coward, and not Ralph.

"Who's boss here?"

'I am,' said Ralph loudly.

A little boy who wore the remains of an extraordinary black cap on his red hair and who carried the remains of a pair of spectacles at his waist, started forward, then changed his mind and stood still." [5:191].

Golding's masks and Beckett's self-annihilation prove to have a lot of ideas in common in spite of their different approaches to their subjects. They both treat the problem of identity with much subtlety. Their use of masks to cover up their characters' identities, of decomposition on various levels, of the microcosm-macrocosm identity etc. are only a few of the aspects that the two books share. In absence of any cardinal

principle they resort to allegory and self-reflection in order to point out that almost everything that surrounds you, shapes you or at least influences you in a slight manner.

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