

**'Asylum under my tread': Silences and Voices in Samuel Beckett's  
*Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates***

**'Asylum under my tread': Silencios y Voces en *Echo's Bones and  
Other Precipitates*, de Samuel Beckett**

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**Resumen**

Al analizar la poesía de Samuel Beckett, la crítica ha señalado la búsqueda del autor de su expresión propia más allá de las limitaciones del lenguaje y del tiempo. Sin embargo, sus poemas iniciales nunca han sido plenamente incorporados al análisis general de su producción poética. El propósito de este artículo es ofrecer un punto de vista diferente desde el que analizar *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* (1935), la primera colección de poemas de Beckett, en estrecha relación con el posible significado del término 'facultatif', utilizado por el propio Beckett en una carta para su amigo Thomas McGreevy para describir esta poética. Mi objetivo principal es el demostrar que Beckett entendió la poesía como un lugar de expresión personal y liberación, en el que le resultaba más sencillo describir sus pensamientos más íntimos. A este respecto, finalmente se considerará "Echo's Bones" como punto clave a través del cual se realizaría una definición general de la poética beckettiana.

**Palabras clave:** Samuel Beckett, *Echo's Bones*, poesía, facultatif, lenguaje poético

**Abstract**

When discussing Samuel Beckett's poetry, critics have noted the author's pursuit of his self-expression beyond the boundaries of language and time. However, his early poetry has never been fully incorporated into general analysis of his poetic production. The aim

of this essay is to offer a different viewpoint from which to consider *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* (1935), Beckett's first collection of poems, in close connection with the potential meaning of the term 'facultatif', used by the author himself in a letter to his friend Thomas McGreevy to describe this poetry. My contention is that Beckett's early poetry was for him a sheltered space of self-expression and liberation, where he could most easily describe his innermost thoughts. In this respect, "Echo's Bones" will be ultimately considered as a key point at which to attempt a general definition of Beckett's poetics.

**Keywords:** Samuel Beckett, *Echo's Bones*, poetry, facultatif, poetic language

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* is a collection of poetry by Samuel Beckett first published in 1935. The main issues relating to its creation, and the images, topics and allusions therein, have been discussed by academics and scholars, Fletcher (1964) and Lawrence E. Harvey (1970) being pioneers here. The landscapes, characters, emotions and experiences portrayed in this series of poems suggest the existence of an erudite and anxious Beckett who had previously shown his writing abilities in both early prose and poetry. Years of solitude, emotional disturbances and a succession of journeys from his native Foxrock to Dublin, Paris and London, alongside the numerous personal dilemmas concerning the search for his own writing voice, as well as those arising from family and social spheres, could eventually foster a fertile environment for the young Beckett to conceive of a collection of poems influenced by literary sources such as Dadaism, Tristan Tzara, James Joyce, André Breton, René Clavel, Jack B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and Paul Eluard. Beckett's poetic output is comparatively brief in comparison to his prose and works for theatre, and remains relatively unknown to the general reader today. Although his novels and plays have been extensively examined by critics for many years, Beckett is unfortunately considered to be an extremely erudite poet, the creator of enigmatic verse, complex in structure and difficult to understand. In fact, his early lyrics recall the Ancient Greek poets, the Provençal 'aubes' and an iconoclastic universe of parallelisms, internal dichotomies and almost inscrutable similes, filtered through literary references —Dante and Beatrice, Romaine poems, Surrealism and Unanimism— and the influence of art —Rembrandt, German expressionists, Cézanne and Ruysdael, among others.

Within the poems written by Beckett during the early 1930s, the collection *Echo's Bones* remains a cryptic case, though many theories have been formulated in an attempt to shed light on the basis of the poems' complex structure and the vast array of motives which might have inspired Beckett to set out an enthralling succession of human dilemmas and de-naturalized icons. One of these icons concerns the Ovidian myth of the nymph Echo and Narcissus, which has a profound influence on the poems in this collection, particularly the last one, 'Echo's Bones'. While 'Alba', 'Sanies', 'The Vulture' and others might feasibly be said to have a closer connection to the author's inner universe and emotional concerns, 'Echo's Bones' is perhaps a more appropriate starting point from which to address each poem. Indeed, 'Echo's Bones' appears as the last item, whilst it was actually the first to be written. The poems in this collection chiasmatically connect and even their themes are thematically associated; not only was 'Echo's Bones' written first, but 'The Vulture', the first poem, was written last –Kosters (2018: 138). Consequently, "the first and last poems of six lines and five lines, respectively, act as a kind of frame for the whole" Pilling (2012: 259). In this respect, 'Echo's Bones' is a useful point of departure to understand the poetic cosmos constituted by each of the poems in the collection, because it was written first, but it also contains the essence that Beckett wants to transmit in the collection. Interestingly,

*The thirteen poems of Echo's Bones (1935), which in their separate titles recall the wandering songs of the twelfth-century troubadour undergoing the trials of exile in 'No Man's Land', display this spatial listening to beginnings and endings, to movement and stasis, to inner and outer pressure. Knottenbelt (1993: 35).*

In the early stage of this analysis it seems necessary to set up a reference point in the enigmatic journey which is to become the speaker's personal search for his own identity in these early poems, for Beckett remained loyal to a specific question throughout his career –who am I?– especially during his first years as a writer, filled as he was with the impelling need to express himself, 'spluttering' his inner thoughts on a piece of paper rather than sketching an outlined compilation of poetic works following traditional approaches. Notwithstanding his inexperienced adherence to experimentation and unusual techniques, the young Beckett still considered his first poems 'facultatif', as expressed in a letter to his close friend Thomas MacGreevy on October 18<sup>th</sup> 1932.<sup>1</sup>As Pilling (1999) has argued, "Beckett's early poems in English make uncomfortable reading

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<sup>1</sup>This letter will be referenced throughout the essay for its strong involvement in Beckett's perception of his early poetry.

in large part because he himself was profoundly discomfited by writing them and by the emotions that had prompted him to write them" (16). Although he himself had the impression of being in some sense devoted to formalism in writing,<sup>2</sup> the truth is that Beckett reached a naturalness of expression in these poems which was far from being accomplished in his many other literary works –Hunkeler (2008: 133), in that he tended to liberate his deeper anxieties and inner affections in his verse, "the ne plus ultra of genres, the medium in which greatness was most difficult to acquire, but imperishable once acquired" Pilling (1999: 16). Interestingly, Beckett was only able to break the chains of erudition and formalism and provide his verse with wholehearted verbalization after his father's death in June 1933, the basis of which would eventually become the 'precipitates': "verse is living 'precipitate' (Beckett's term) of living thought" Fletcher (1964: 325).

The aim of this essay is presenting a new approach to Beckett's early poetry in *Echo's Bones*, a different viewpoint from which to consider the whole collection. The idea of poetry as a shelter will be of paramount importance in the interpretation of the poems. Hence, the objective is to tentatively establish correspondences between his voice as an author and the desperate, grieving voice of the nymph Echo by revisiting theories that already exist on the study of the collection, giving an account of the main paradigms, figures and motifs present in these poems, and ultimately discussing the notion of 'facultatif', used by Beckett himself in his letter to MacGreevy to describe this early collection.

## **2. ECHO'S BONES: EARLY POEMS FROM A TRANSITIONAL PERIOD**

As noted above, the collection *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* was first published in 1935 by Europa Press (Paris). There is a central motif for the whole collection: "the infinite decomposition of the universe faced with the inquisitive gaze of the poetic-self" Monrós (2016: 156, my translation). In this disintegrated reality, the poet decomposes the bodies of other beings and objects surrounding him until their bones become the extant residue of their corporality: stones. While this process occurs, the reader witnesses a parallel decomposition: that of the language. Thus, there exists an internal dichotomy between body and mind, and the self and language. This is a process of experimental

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<sup>2</sup>In connection with Beckett's formalism in writing, Nixon (2015) has claimed: "Beckett's early poems (...) are similarly marked by verbal virtuosity, self-consciousness, learned allusiveness and an attempt to poetically treat the tensions between subject and object" (76).

deconstruction in which the poet experiences a double metamorphosis with reminiscences to the Ovidian myth; physical objects change and degenerate, and so too does the language.

This early collection could be influenced by a series of episodes and other determining factors in Beckett's early life. One of these is the exaggerated erudition of the young Beckett, having attended the classes of Professor Rudmose-Brown at Trinity College from 1923 to 1927, learning from the most brilliant academic sources and acquiring an array of notions of literature, art and philosophy. However, other calamitous circumstances that took place during the period 1931-1935, recounted by one of his most renowned biographers—James Knowlson—prepared the ground for the expression of his internal turmoil in the poems in *Echo's Bones*: his resignation from a promising academic career at Trinity College in 1931 —feeling tired and unfocused on the task of teaching, his depressing trip to London in 1932, the repeated disagreements with his mother, May Beckett, his continuous failures in love, and the lasting difficulties he had in publishing his writing. Among this succession of unfortunate circumstances, one from which it was especially difficult for Beckett to recover was the death of his father in June 1933. From this moment on, he experienced a transformation, not only in his life, but also in his writing: the transition from the youthful period to adulthood, in which he developed a mature, less pretentious and more natural expression.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the poems in *Echo's Bones*, written during this crucial moment in his life, “occupy a liminal space between his early and mature writing” Margarit (2006: 72, my translation), representing a kind of chain between the erudition of the Trinity collegiate and the sincerity and plain —although by no means easily comprehensible— expression of a self-constructed individual.

In terms of his literary aesthetics, he had previously defined his poetic conceptions in his essay *Recent Irish Poetry* (1934) and in his early poems 'Whoroscope' (1930), 'Yoke of Liberty' —an initial version of 'Moly'— (1931), 'Hell Crane to Starling' (1931), 'Casket of Pralinen for the Daughter of a Dissipated Mandarin' (1931), 'Spring Song' (1931), 'Text' (1932), 'Gnome' (written in 1932 and published in 1934) and 'Home Olga' (1934), written during these years of initial experimentation with poetry.

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<sup>3</sup>From the death of his father onwards, and after a long period of inactivity in writing, Beckett experienced the inner necessity of expressing himself, as he asserted in the letter to MacGreevy previously cited, in which he affirmed that he had “nothing to say but the itch to make” (Harvey 273) and to read for the sole purpose of delight, not to get inspiration. Perhaps the plain assertion he made in the letter, and his underestimation of his own writing, has somehow drawn attention away from the collection *Echo's Bones* in terms of its relevance in literary criticism.

Incidentally, during the years of solitude and personal introspection which followed his withdrawal from his parents' house and the death of his father, Beckett attended psychoanalysis sessions from doctor W.R. Bion at Tavistock Clinic (London), which would be also be reflected in the poems in *Echo's Bones*. As Monrós observes, "the tendency towards reclusion and isolation which Beckett associates as vital experiences will be depicted in the journey through the internal life that he himself eventually discovers while writing *Echo's Bones*" (155). Hypothetically, these sessions of psychoanalysis might have led to Beckett's intention to establish a division between body and mind in the poems in this collection. The split body suffers the decrepitude of the world it inhabits. The monstrosity of a universe breaking down as depicted here is a recurrent image in the poems; "through the decomposition of the world, the elements belonging to the world isolated from the self eventually show their actual deformity" (155).

Similarly, the poet undertakes two different processes of dislocation and displacement in these poems. In his early verse, Beckett did not adhere to the cultural tradition of his native Ireland, but removed both his poems and himself from the typical images associated with the poetry of his time: the sense of rootedness, the description of objects and landscapes, the ethereal veil of nostalgia, folklore and familiarity represented in scenes of rural life and mutual comradeship. Instead, Beckett takes his writing from this stereotypical narrative and deepens it into an innovative form of expression: that of the spirit, located nowhere, belonging to a wandering individual in his personal search for shelter and isolation from a world which does not meet his expectations. Indeed, descriptions of places and characters are not frequent in *Echo's Bones*, for Beckett had become accustomed to asserting something else in these poems. He felt compelled of giving an account of what he needed to express instead of describing the characters and atmospheres in detail, as traditional poetry has it. So, as Pearson (2015) notes, the removal or displacement in *Echo's Bones* is both historical, in that Beckett attempted to escape from tradition, and personal, since he felt the need to retire from the universe surrounding him and break the rules of convention: he was longing for experimentation and self-expression (108).

Despite his inability to get his material published, Beckett remained true to his personal style and even created new forms of poetry by expressing his intimate thoughts. Not only was the content of his poems outrageously eccentric, but the formal parameters of his verse were too. In *Echo's Bones*, the rhyme is "wrenched" and the paused rhythm focuses

on the “pressure of time in space” in a continuous ‘moving back – moving forward’ succession, with a static point of no return (Knottenbelt 1993: 37). The typographical arrangement of the verses as well as the multiple blank spaces around and within them reinforce the numerous wandering silences found in the poems. The essence of failure, continuously present throughout Beckett’s literary development, is also present in the rhythm and cadence of *Echo's Bones*, for the inertia of following and not surrendering to life’s tribulations can also be found in the tired, iambic measure of his verse (36), as well as in a language full of obscure images and mourning figures –skulls, prostitutes, beasts and physical degradation.

The syntax in these poems is equally complex and hard to make out, and the rhetorical figures are scarce and limited; alliteration and allusions appear as proof of the “Dantean baggage” present in Beckett’s poetry in ‘Alba’ and ‘Dortmunder’ –Lawlor (2007: 229) –, perhaps two of the most significant poems for Beckett, together with ‘Enueg I’ (letter to MacGreevy 1932). In fact, the two poems have a similar structure: anticipation of the arrival of the female figure, consummation of the action, and transformative disappointment (228).

With respect to the sources from which Beckett drew inspiration, we might include, to name the most significant, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the Medieval Provençal genre and the tradition of the troubadours as recorded in ‘Alba’ and ‘Enueg I’, Biblical sources –especially for the repeated allusions to the figure of Jesus Christ–, Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, *Les Illuminations* of Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Eluard, Goethe, and “Schopenhauer’s explanation of the possibility of escape from the domination of the will” –Lawlor (2007: 234).

Another original feature of the collection is the innovative structure Beckett created for the poems, which would survive in many of his later works, for example, the *mirlitonades*, in which the haiku structure is maintained. The precipitates are a new typological poetic concept, one which transcends the definition of a chemical process (according to *Collins Dictionary*, ‘to precipitate’ means “to cause a slightly soluble substance to become insoluble, as by heat or by a chemical reagent, and separate out from a solution”) to model the existing matter of literary exercise into verse. As Pilling notes:

(...) he began to take the implications of the word ‘precipitates’ seriously, treating precipitates as first-order activities, rather than just ancillary add-ons or afterthoughts. Almost all of Beckett’s poems after *Echo's Bones* take a ‘precipitative’ form, and in the event only very limited revision of them was called for (...) (2015b: 25).



As a matter of fact, the precipitates are basically the linguistic residue of a whole procedure of self-alienation and poetic expression: the proof that something actually existed, as Echo's bones and voice are the only remnants of her existence. According to this peculiar poetic construction, the poems in the collection are outlined as follows: 'The Vulture' would serve as a prologue, while 'Enueg I' and 'Enueg II' act as a pair. The same occurs with 'Sanies I' and 'Sanies II'. Similarly, 'Serena' I, II, and III are interconnected. On the other hand, 'Alba', 'Dortmunder' and 'Malacoda' occupy an intermediary status, not because of their position in the collection, but because they are unique and essentially distinctive. Finally, 'Da Tagte Es' and 'Echo's Bones' make up the epilogue. In the following sections, the main themes, images, motifs and other aspects relating to the content of the poems will be discussed.

### 2.1. The poems

The thirteen poems in *Echo's Bones* cover a variety of topics and themes, some of them sharing similar characters and common subjects. Perhaps the key here is not to try to interpret the poems, but to consider them as fragmented pieces of self. As we shall see, the main poem 'Echo's Bones' clearly transmits this idea, for it might help to sustain the theory that Beckett could be building a shelter to protect his thoughts from the violence of the world he inhabits. This section will provide some orientation to the poems' main topics, this in anticipation of what will follow in the analysis of Beckett's potential perception of poetry as a refuge.

'The Vulture' opens the collection, though it was the last poem to be written, as noted above. This poem is inspired in Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's poem 'Harzreise im winter' ('Winter Mourning in the Harzreise Mountains'), written in 1777. In 'The Vulture', Beckett establishes a dichotomy between the flying vulture—which would correspond to the poet himself—and his prey: the words (Margarit 79). In this respect, the poet is seeking his most valuable object of desire while he 'flies' around his verse; that is, he is looking for the unattainable words. Similarly, as Hunkeler had asserted, this dichotomy also extended to the elements of the sky and the earth, in the sense that the poet is metaphorically in the sky and his prey—the words—are down on the earth (137): "of my skull shell of sky and earth" (Beckett 2012: 23). The man here is a microcosm, an individual representing the whole universe and all the elements, eventually undertaking a play of deconstruction in which the opposition is placed within the mind of the poet. Hence, the skull which Beckett



mentions is essentially a kind of recipient containing the sky, the earth and the vulture's hunger. Here, the apparent opposition between the earth and the sky is depicted as a projection of the established order within the chaos and the inner life of the poet, who endures a desperate existence in a world he would like to embrace –Talens (2000: 26).

Alternatively, 'Enueg I' begins with the word 'exeo', which in effect summarizes the central idea of many of the poems in the collection. From the Ovidian 'Metamorphosis', the poet retells his long imaginary pilgrimage through Dublin with images of putrefaction, desolation and exile:

*Above the mansions the algum-trees  
the mountains  
my skull sullenly  
clot of anger  
skewered aloft strangled in the cang of the wind  
bites like a dog against its chastisement (6)*

The protagonist, radically agitated by the spasm presented in the first line of the poem, cannot endure his pain, and this is his main reason for escaping. He involuntarily abandons the world which he inhabits, looking for a possible reconciliation with suffering. However, such a solution seems unattainable; he is tired of his own existence within the futility and deformity in the world: "tired of my darling's red sputum" (6). Throughout the poem, he represents an exiled man, thus creating an abyss between the superficial reality and his private thoughts, being socially annulled within the vastness of the cosmos: (...) "I trundle along rapidly now on my ruined feet / flush with the livid canal" (6).

The exterior world is perceived as strange and distant from him. 'Enueg II' continues this displacement from the outer reality, with unusual and violent images and allusions to religion: "the prey of policemen on the lookout for vagrants in 'Enueg II,' the narrator is like that other social misfit, Jesus Christ, and plods on until he lies exhausted on O'Connell Bridge" –Harvey (1970: 150).

'Alba' is among the poems that Beckett himself most valued, together with 'Enueg I' and 'Dortmunder'. The poem has echoes of the troubadours' Provençal tradition of 'aubes' or dawn songs and is inspired by Beckett's youthful affair with Ethna MacCarthy, an impossible love with the girl he met when a student in Dublin, in 1923. Ethna was a medic

and fellow Trinity College student, and is said to have been Beckett's first love.<sup>4</sup> However, the relationship never strictly materialized, and Ethna would eventually marry Con Leventhal, one of Beckett's closest friends. Though he always respected their union, it would take Beckett a long time to be cured of his love for Ethna. This feeling of the impossible would also influence the poems 'Serena I' and 'Serena II'. In the verses of 'Alba', Ethna is transformed into the idealised Beatrice of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, whose arrival at dawn he is impatiently expecting: "before morning you shall be here" (10), he sings under the veil of the moon. However, the poet's expectations are not met, and he feels the discontentment of unconsummated love and weary deception:

*(...) shall not add to your bounty  
whose beauty shall be a sheet before me  
a statement of itself drawn across the tempest of emblems  
so that there is no sun and no unveiling  
and no host  
only I and then the street  
and bulk dead (10)*

Something similar occurs in 'Dortmunder', whose action is located in a brothel or an exotic public house. This time, idealised love is not the central element of the poem, but rather an encounter with a prostitute: "she stands before me in the bright stall" (11).

'Sanies I' and 'Sanies II', on the other hand, represent the poet's attempt to heal the wound inflicted on him by the world and humanity. Both poems explore two of the crucial events in every individual's life: weaning and death. Beckett wrote this poem when he came back to Dublin in 1933 after resigning from Trinity and faced the shock of meeting Ethna, now married to Leventhal. Likewise, 'Sanies II' recalls the memories of his first experience in Paris as lecturer at the *École Normale Supérieure* in 1929. Once more the brothel theme is present, with recollections of brothels in Dublin and Germany, where the reader not only finds degradation in the outer world, as in the 'Enuegs', but also the degradation of the female figure and love:

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<sup>4</sup>In words of Knowlson, "During his undergraduate years, Beckett first fell in love. It is almost impossible to discover exactly when he succumbed to the spell of Ethna MacCarthy, although it was probably soon after his arrival at Trinity College" (72). Moreover, "Beckett, on his own admission, adored Ethna, but said that the relationship with her never became a sexual one" (73). Despite her marriage with Leventhal, Beckett's affection for Ethna would last a lifetime, until her premature death in 1959.

*I see main verb at last  
her whom alone in the accusative  
I have dismounted to love  
gliding towards me dauntless nautch-girl on the face of the waters  
dauntless daughter of desires in the old black flamingo  
get along with you now take the six the seven the eight or the  
little single-decker (Sanies I, 13).*

The 'Serena' poems –I, II and III– follow, though they hardly equate to the normal definition of the word 'serena' in their meaning.<sup>5</sup> In these poems, Beckett associates contemporary figures from psychoanalysis with animals from the London zoo. Some of the major features of the poems are the constrained charm of Ireland in 'Serena I', the sirenic ring of 'Serena II' and a poet eventually succumbing to the attractiveness of Siren Island in 'Serena III', where sexualised and mythological imagery mixed with a tone of great disappointment apply to the process of artistic creation: "the tide making the dun gull in a panic / the sands quicken in your hot heart" (20). Indeed, art here is still faced with the impossibility of life itself; it "keeps on the move" (20).<sup>6</sup>

However, as commented above, continuing with life was not an easy undertaking for Beckett after his father's unexpected death, an event which hastened the creation of 'Malacoda',<sup>7</sup> and which, together with the two last poems in the collection, is his personal attempt to express the desolation of his loss. 'Malacoda' is the transformation of the Dantean demon into the gravedigger who will bury William Beckett's corpse at his funeral. 'Malacoda' lives in hell and comes to the surface to guide the dead ones, thus making us question whether this world is part of the 'Inferno' described by Dante, which is indeed a constant issue throughout *Echo's Bones*:

*(...) to cover  
to be sure cover cover all over  
your targe allow me to hold your sulphur  
divine dogday glass set fair  
stay Scarmilion stay stay  
Lay this Huysum on the box  
mind the imago it is he*

<sup>5</sup> A 'serena' is a Provençal evening song in which the lover expresses his sadness during the day while he awaits the night, when he will meet his lover. Moreover, a 'serena' (siren) is a dream sequence in 'Purgatorio' by Dante –Pilling (2012: 282).

<sup>6</sup> 'Keep on the move' is the last verse of 'Serena III'. Once again Beckett's philosophy of 'going on' is present, as it would be throughout his literary career.

<sup>7</sup> The name 'Malacoda' is derived from canto XXI of Dante's 'Inferno' in *Divine Comedy*.

*hear she must see she must  
all aboard all souls  
half-mast aye aye  
nay (21).*

'Da Tagte Es' was inspired by a refrain of the medieval poet of Austrian origin Walther von der Vogelweide, 'Tagelied': 'Nehmet, Fraue, diesen Kranz' ('Take, Lover, this Wreath'). The original poem presents a dream vision of a young woman whom the poet brings a wreath of flowers. However, the poet eventually mourns in disappointment when realizing the impossibility of blending the oneiric and the real worlds. Beckett appropriates this same sense of disappointment by representing a withdrawal towards another world, towards death: "redeem the surrogate goodbyes" (22).

Finally, 'Echo's Bones' constitutes the finishing touch for this procession through human anxieties, frustrated desires and eternal longing for redemption and liberation, one which has entailed wandering around the streets of London, Dublin and Galway. 'Echo's Bones' is the Beckettian retelling of the Ovidian myth, the climax of a dreadful succession of mourning voices, phantasmagorical images and deconstructed places. Here, decomposition reaches its highest point when "their muffled revels as the flesh falls / breaking without fear of favour wind" (23). Thus, the final result of the whole process of decomposition of the world and of the individual is now made explicit. Although this poem has not been as highly valued as others, like 'Alba' and 'Dortmunder'—which had "something arborescent or of the sky" (letter to MacGreevy 1932) – there is reason to believe that it summarizes the essence of this collection, for Beckett feasibly built a shelter to cover his verse from the violence of the outer world: "asylum under my tread all this day" (23). The "asylum" the poetic persona has created beneath his futile existence might be a way to find consolation and intimacy in isolation. This issue will be analysed in further detail in the following section, since Echo's words and silences are the guiding thread and the structural element of the poems in *Echo's Bones*, where Beckett merged his greatest tribulations concerning human existence and the decay of a denaturalized world, devoid of compassion and freedom.

### **3. 'ASYLUM UNDER MY TREAD': POETRY AS A SHELTER**

*Asylum under my tread all this day  
their muffled revels as the flesh falls*

*breaking without fear or favour wind  
the gantelope of sense and nonsense run  
taken by the maggots for what they are*  
(Beckett 2012: 23)

'Echo's Bones' was the first written poem of the collection and deals with a variety of topics concerning ideas about the self, the "loss of the beloved", and "the metamorphosis of the lover through suffering caused by frustration of desire" (Harvey 70). This poem recalls the Greek Ovidian myth of Echo and Narcissus in *Metamorphoses*:<sup>8</sup> the graceful nymph Echo secretly loves Narcissus and mourns his love, but she is sentenced by the goddess Juno to repeat every sound she hears. Being rejected by Narcissus, Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, put a spell on him: when reflected in the waters of the river, he would fall in love with himself and become absorbed by his own image. But this fatal event only made Echo's obsession with Narcissus grow to exaggerated proportions; the nymph lost her youth and beauty as the years passed. Her love for Narcissus remained alive although her body withered and she was reduced to bones; the existing matter of her whole being was now a mixture of the physical degradation of her body and the reverberant echo of her grieving voice. Recently, Patricia Novillo-Corvalán has emphasised the existing connection between the Classic legend and Beckett's poem:

*Alluding to the Ovidian myth of 'Echo and Narcissus', in which Echo is transformed into a pile of bones as a punishment for her excessive chatter, and written shortly after the death of his father on 26 June 1933, the poem is concerned with the post-mortem putrefaction of the human body (2019: 90).*

Interestingly, Novillo-Corvalán connects the topics of loss, mourning, putrefaction and death represented in 'Echo's Bones' to the choices Beckett made to translate a poem entitled 'Before a Corpse', attributed to the Mexican poet Manuel Acuña Navarro: both the title "together with the poem's preoccupation with bodily decay and transformation" (90) bear comparison with the images and motifs represented in 'Echo's Bones' regarding the decomposition of flesh and the decay of material constructs: "their muffled revels as the

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<sup>8</sup> It might be useful here to consider Pilling's (2015a) observations on the relation between Beckett and the Ovidian myth: "Beckett's sallies into classical literature are few and far between, but Narcissus and Echo served him exceptionally well as a narrative constellation emblematic of his own spiritual condition, and indeed proved much more useful to him in the long run than the ragbag of doublets -Damon and Phythias, Pylades and Orestes, Nisus and Euryalus- that he had found in a cluster in the third book of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*" (6).

flesh falls / breaking without fear or favour wind" (23). Echo's body, first transmuted into dead flesh and eventually converted into stones, represents a process of putrefaction with the negative connotations this word conveys: death, corruption and deterioration. However, the nymph ultimately finds redemption when the last particles of her body are reduced to ashes and only her bones remain. Thus, petrification is a purifying process that removes any hint of putrid flesh and manifests the existence of solid, material bones as the only evidence of Echo's grief.

In the early years of his life, Beckett developed a notable attraction to and need for solitude, mixed with an authentic devotion to the sea and to the process of petrification. When a child, "he recounted how he used to take stones of which he was particularly fond home with him from the beach in order to protect them from the wearing away of the waves of the vagaries of the weather" (Knowlson 46). It might be plausible to connect this anecdote from his childhood with an adult desire to protect his icons and thoughts from the space without, keeping them safe from reality. And when we speak about his icons, we refer to three specific concerns: lost love, metamorphosis, and art, as Harvey (69-71) puts in. As a result, we can tentatively claim that Beckett might be building a safe space within his poetry where his deepest anxieties and afflictions coexist, not in harmony, but in despair. Even in despair, the poet would free his mind and pursue relief and self-liberation through metamorphosis. Indeed, the hypothesis here is that he might be appropriating the Ovidian metamorphosis in a very specific way: his words touch his verses and emotions, subsequently suffering a transformation. In the long run, these expressed emotions experience a cathartic process of release and are eventually transformed into residues; they become the extant matter of the poet's lament, the bones, the precipitates, the wandering voice of Echo.

In some sense, both Echo and Narcissus, in their parallel stories, represent the archetypes of the poet's main concerns: frustrated love and desire, a yearning for ideal beauty—beauty of expression in terms of Beckett's verse—, and eventual sickness, aging, and death. Nothingness. In fact, most of the poems in *Echo's Bones* are connected with the impossibility of attaining love. Echo's true love for Narcissus becomes an unconceivable ideal, a mere reflection of his own image in the waters. But not only is her love transformed: Echo herself is eventually metamorphosed through grief and unfulfilled desire. Her anxieties and illusions are now a long chain of frustrated hopes derived from

the acceptance of true reality. Decay, oblivion and abandonment become central elements in the verses, in the same way as they would be at the core of Beckett's later writing.

There is compelling biographical information to suggest that Beckett's voice in the poem might conceivably correspond to Echo's lost voice. During the whole of his literary career, he had an interest in the importance of language; finding the correct words to express himself was evident not only in his prose works, but also in his poems – 'Cascando' and 'What is the word?', to name just two, published in 1963 and 1989, respectively—. One of his major concerns was related to the possibility of expressing the inexpressible, as he had reflected it in one of his early essays –*Proust* (1930). Through the development of his writing, he endured a personal battle between the need to put into words his emotional turmoil and his arduous commitment to the appropriate use of language. In this respect, the poet reasonably perceives the language as something external to himself: an effusion of words belonging to others, not his own voice. Writing, then, becomes a burdensome crusade to find his own identity and to say what he has in mind. A Pulido (2016) comments, the last poem, 'Echo's Bones', enhances an interpretation on "the problem of language" presented in the whole collection (105).

After a kind of pilgrimage to escape the places he inhabited, the voice speaking in the poems is reduced to the repetition of other voices, strange and unknown. Pearson (2015) invokes this lyrical practise of displacement when he notes "Beckett's aesthetic of placelessness" (104) in an attempt to reject the boundaries of the places where the poet lived, and thus to embrace the human dislocation towards cosmopolitanism and self-encounter. Although it is consistent to believe that "throughout *Echo's Bones* Beckett undermines any strategy of personal deliverance that the speaker might derive from the natural world" –Hutton-Williams (2016: 31) –, the poems in this collection are imbued with an atmosphere of disorientation, displacement and expatriation which tentatively guides the poet to break with the burdens of tradition. In this respect, the narrative voice here begs not for recognition, but for the free expression of its intended message, hitherto silenced in obscurity and censorship. Additionally, dislocation might also be understood here in relation to the writer's purpose "to move beyond the boundaries of what is consciously known" Mays (1984: 22), deriving from detachment to the exploration of innovative forms of poetic expression.

Hence exile, the need for self-expression, and final resignation, are blended to portray a fight between "the poet's inner world and the outside world" (153). The hypothesis here is



that, unable to make his own voice louder than the outer world's sounds, the author eventually confirms that everything is subject to time; decay and oblivion constitute a human duality in their own strangeness. Something similar occurs with Echo. The cursed nymph, devoid of her bodily features and terribly doomed, remains isolated in despair and nothingness. Only her bones and her voice wander through the memories of unattained love and sorrow: "Echo is forced to depart from love as love is forced to depart her -the bones remain, and so does Echo's: the cries, the 'other precipitates': 'Alba', 'Dortmunder', 'Cascando' –Kosters (1992: 95) –. These 'precipitates', filled with 'Dantean' images and allusions, correspond to a lyrical exercise in introspection and intimacy; in these early poems Beckett is more intricately obscure and committed to his own deep concerns than in his later poetry. "The poem looks ahead, starts to speak for itself, the poet being consciously aware of the lack of space between his eye and the head he looks into", as Kosters describes it (99).

My contention is that Beckett dehumanizes the language in his journey into the world's petrification in search of new ways of recovering elements of himself and those of reality in decomposition. However, as Pulido asserts, he does not find in silence a moment of absolute realization, this being the reason why he cannot wholly renounce to language (164). In the poem 'Echo's Bones', the images presented are as violent and explicit as they are in other poems in the collection: we are witness to flesh falling, a gantelope –an emblem of "sense and nonsense" – running or, more appropriately, escaping, while the maggots surround and consume this scene of decay and decomposition. A deforming echo is a central motif here, an echo in which words are reduced to a language which is constantly repeating and transmuting. Matter, the solid residues, are reduced to a formal and thematic repetition. Also, the poet's internal world is superposed on reality, and memory and outer elements merge in poetic images, thus offering a double vision of reality and of the poet's visual perception.

Echo is the representation of frustrated human desires and overwhelming anxieties. Her bones are the materialization of unfulfilled wishes and her voice the ethereal result of her vane attempts to obtain what she wanted. She does not exist now, but that voice, those bones, remain as proof of her prior existence and all that she represented in life. The same occurs with Beckett's poetry. His literary language is the surviving demonstration of this overlapping of hopes and unrequited ambitions. For all this, it could be assumed that poetry in *Echo's Bones* could be considered as a safe space for the author, a sheltered place

where he sets down his internal turmoil. It is the closed cave, on the eroded walls of which he carves incomprehensible messages and splutters his deepest emotions, in complete loneliness.

### 3.1. The notion of 'facultatif'

In the letter to MacGreevy Beckett wrote on 18<sup>th</sup> October 1932, mentioned above, Beckett described his own poetry as 'facultatif'. Although this definition has already been discussed by critics, there is no plausible explanation as to what the Irish author wanted to say here. Our intention is to offer a new approach, since it can provide clues to interpret the whole collection:

*(...) Genuinely again my feeling is, more and more, that the greater part of my poetry, though it may be reasonably felicitous in its choice of terms, fails precisely because it is facultatif. Whereas the 3 or 4 I like, and that seem to have been drawn down against the really dirty weather of one of these fine days into the burrow of the 'private life', Alba & the long Enueg & Dortmund & even Moly, do not and never did give me that impression of being construits. I cannot explain very well to myself what they have that distinguishes them from the others, but it is something arborescent or of the sky, not Wagner, not clouds on wheels; written above an abscess and not out of a cavity, a statement and not a description of heat in the spirit to compensate for the pus in the spirit. (...)* (2009, 134).

In this respect, Hunkeler proposes a distinction between the 'facultatif' or 'construit' poems and those poems in which the act of writing represents an absolute necessity for the author—the poems 'Alba', 'Enueg I', 'Dortmunder' and 'Moly', which is a first version of 'Yoke of Liberty'— (134). Beckett would adopt Eluard's approach and distance himself from the academicism and intentionality of Mallarmé's poetry. As Hunkeler comments, Eluard is the starting point for Beckett in writing his poems; not a prefigured model that he would blindly follow, but an inspiration far from the impelling intellectualism of his time (135). In fact, Fletcher (1964) remarks that "Beckett, who translated Eluard, owes a lot to his unique brand of wry, laconic tenderness and melancholy" (325).

Similarly, it is enigmatic the concept of "something arborescent or of the sky" he uses to describe some of the poems, these perhaps being the ones in which he may have felt more emotionally involved because they are inspired in his love for Ethna MacCarthy and in encounters with prostitutes during some of the difficult moments of his youth. He refuses all rhetorical artifices and grandiloquence, embracing instead the simplicity of the

assertions, not the magnificence and mannerism of descriptions. As Pilling (2015b) has observed, “one way of making ‘statement’ and ‘image’ coincide was to re-think what the image needed to do, an issue which Beckett found it easier to address in the non-verbal medium of painting” (26). This relation between painting, statements and images seems coherent if we take into account Beckett’s admiration for all forms of artistic creation. Consequently, he establishes a correspondence between the literary art –or putting his thoughts into words– and the creative work of writers and painters like Jack B. Yeats, whom he profoundly admired and whose paintings had a great impact on his imagination, for they inspired him to elaborate on the affinities between the artist and the world (Knowlson 160). Additionally, Pilling (1999) says that he “sought to avoid anything that could be called ‘facultatif’: optional, discretionary, non-essential. His difficulty was, that in seeking ‘a statement and not a description’ (same letter), he could not wholly liberate himself from descriptive or, more broadly, enabling gestures” (18).

After writing ‘Whoroscope’ –published in 1930–, things changed for Beckett, since he started to value his poems in some sense, perhaps because he felt more emotionally attached to ‘Alba’, ‘Enueg’ and ‘Dortmunder’ than to his earlier poetry. However, the objective here is to explore his intentions when he confessed to MacGreevy that his poetry was ‘facultatif’. The term comes from French, a language he spoke perfectly. Literally, ‘facultatif’ is something ‘optional’, non-necessary. In this sense, his early poems are something he could have avoided, something “that may not happen or be, contingent” (*Collins Dictionary*). Nevertheless, ‘Alba’, ‘Enueg’ and ‘Dortmunder’, to name just a few of his most valued poems, were not optional poems. As he said, they were written under his own irrational necessity of putting into words his feelings and coming up with terms for his internal dichotomies. Obviously, the disappointment he felt when he met Leventhal with Ethna MacCarthy, the Dantean muse he transformed into the central character of ‘Alba’, was not something optional. His years of solitude, the searching in his personal life, in a vague and overwhelming atmosphere, filled with disenchantment and despair, were not an option. One might even speculate from his biography that resigning from Trinity and escaping the family house were not options for him. Wandering around the streets of London, alone and depressed, was not something optional. He felt the need to do it, as he

also needed to express the grief and feelings of absence and loneliness after the death of his father in 'Da Tagte Es' and 'Malacoda', because he could not explicitly talk about him.<sup>9</sup> However, a close reading of his verse together with the existent theories by other critics above mentioned might suggest that Beckett takes refuge within his own words, inside his verse, deep in his thoughts. He skilfully transformed the Ovidian myth into a paradoxical representation of life's affairs: the constant human metamorphosis which begins in the mother's womb will not stop until death. For death is the end of suffering, yet the poet wants his wounds healed in life after all. He endures a long journey in search of consolation, freedom and evasion, since his internal voice not only recalls the suffering and fatal events in the earthy world, but also knows that surrendering to pain is not an option; that would be something 'facultatif'. Beckett instead embraces the impulsive effervescence of the mind, the "spontaneous combustion of the spirit" (letter to MacGreevy 1932). This characteristic effusion of words would become a constant feature throughout his literary career. In the end, he would write more poems and leave this world after having wondered 'What is the word?'. However, Beckett would never be as passionately devoted to his lyrical oeuvre as he was in his youth, when he wrote *Echo's Bones*. This collection represents the transition from the initial stage of his life to the age of maturity and reaffirmation of himself as a whole individual, able to cope with life's concerns and emotional dilemmas.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This essay has taken as a point of departure Samuel Beckett's initial poems in his early collection, *Echo's Bones*, published in 1935. The main themes, characters, places and motifs found in the verses therein are exile, 'subject-object' rupture, disillusion and disappointment, the decay of a dying world depicted as a spectacle of barbarians, depravation and violence, and are nowhere better represented except in the poem we have chosen as representative of the whole collection: 'Echo's Bones'. From this point of view, the poem acquires a new coherence that has not previously perceived. In this collection, Beckett might be building a shelter to cover his deepest afflictions, freeing his mind and pursuing self-liberation through a process of metamorphosis which echoes Ovid's myth.

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<sup>9</sup>In a letter to MacGreevy (9<sup>th</sup> October 1933), Beckett alluded to his father's death and melancholically admitted that "I can't write about him, I can only walk the fields and climb the ditches after him" (165).

Additionally, the notion of 'facultatif', as he defined his initial poetry, has been discussed as a mode of rethinking the inspiration for Beckett's writing, derived from events in his life and the main worries and concerns that occupied him. Poetry in *Echo's Bones* is an exercise of liberation and constant definition of himself as an individual who suffers and perceives reality beyond the veil of tradition and academicism, and his verses are nothing less than the reaffirmation of a parallel reality existing in the poet's voice, mourning in lament and rather suggesting than affirming through his poetry. All in all, his bones—now transmuted into words—and his voice, which recalls Echo's own voice, are the literary evidence of his youthful tribulations, his verse being the only place where he could possibly find relief and redemption.

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