BECKETT'S WINDOWS AND THE WINDOWLESS SELF

Naoya Mori

Beckett uses a “window device” that appears open to the outer world, yet is really closed, viewless and practically “windowless”. From “a small frosted skylight” of Murphy until the last window of Stirrings Still, the “windowless” window has kept evoking a condition of issueless room/mind inhabited by protagonists like Murphy, Watt, Malone, and Hamm. Focusing upon the window in Beckett’s oeuvre, this article formulates his strategic use of the window device as a solipsistic expression, that is, the Leibnizian monadic “windowless self”.

The theme of the connection between Beckett and Leibniz is not new. Ever since Germaine Brée claimed in 1963 that “Beckett’s Watt is a re-incarnation of Voltaire’s Candide, a metaphysical Candide to be sure, a real Leibnizian windowless monad” (Brée, 572), there have been numerous suggestions of Leibniz’s influence on Beckett. Despite Garin Dowd’s attempt, following Deleuze, to detail the many resonances of Leibnizian themes and concepts comprehensively, it seems that the theme has still not been fully explored. By shedding light on Beckett’s windows, as a starting point, I will show how the metaphysics of Leibniz gives a fundamental framework to Beckett’s window.

It is a cliché that the window represents the eye of the mind, the room, or the body. The cliché draws upon John Locke, who describes the mind of a person at birth as a tabula rasa comparing it to “the yet empty Cabinet” and to the “dark Room” upon which experience imprints knowledge (Locke, 162-3). Leibniz, who asserts the contrary and believes in innate ideas refutes him. Beckett knows their arguments and writes in his “Whoroscope” notebook: “Leibniz to Locke”/“Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu, nisi ipse intellectus” (Nothing is in the intellect that will not first have been in
the senses, except the intellect itself). Against this background, Beckett makes a number of references to windows throughout his oeuvre.

The window, in general, has a dual function; it makes a threshold of inside and outside. It constitutes a wall against the outer world, but through its transparency the exterior merges into the interior, and vice versa. The duality of Beckett’s window, however, parts company with this traditional notion. Not only are Beckett’s windows more complex, as we shall see, they do not actually let in the outer world at all. To summarize, there are three remarkable dualities of Beckett’s window apparatus: the real/unreal, the inside/outside, and the closedness.

1. Real/Unreal

Of the real/unreal dualism, Malone describes his bedside window as something real and plausible: “My bed is by the window. I lie turned towards it most of the time. I see roofs and sky, a glimpse of street too, if I crane” (1958, 184). Yet elsewhere Malone evokes skepticism about its existence, so that the window bears a shade of unreality and implausibility:

> And if I succeed in breathing my last it will not be in the street, or in a hospital, but here, in the midst of my possessions, beside this window that sometimes looks as if it were painted on the wall, [...].

(235)

A similar phenomenon that offers ambiguity and incredibility to the seemingly ordinary window is also perceptible in *Endgame* and *Company*. At the beginning of *Endgame*, Clov looks out of the windows, and reports to Hamm what he could see from them. But, after all, the outer-light does not seem to reach Hamm through the window:

Hamm: Bring me under the window. [Clov goes towards chair.] I want to feel the light on my face. [Clov pushes chair.] [...][Clov stops the chair under window right.] There already? [Pause. He tilts back his head.] Is it light?

Clov: It isn’t dark.

Hamm: [Angrily.] I’m asking you is it light.

Clov: Yes [Pause.]
HAMM: The curtain isn’t closed?
CLOV: No.
HAMM: What window is it?
CLOV: The earth.
HAMM: I knew it! [Angrily.] But there’s no light there! The other! [Clov pushes chair towards window left.] The earth! [Clov stops the chair under window left. Hamm tilts back his head.] That’s what I call light! [Pause.] Feels like a ray of sunshine. [Pause.] No?
CLOV: No.
HAMM: It isn’t a ray of sunshine I feel on my face?
CLOV: No.

(1986, 123)

Although Hamm orders Clov to open the window to hear the sea, Clov’s opening the window makes no difference to Hamm, so that the dialogue arouses only skepticism about the window and its reality.

Also, in Company, a voice tells of a past, “with occasional allusion to a present and more rarely to a future” to “one on his back” (1996, 4) in the dark, referring to four windows. The first window appears in what the voice describes as “you” at birth: “You first saw the light in the room you most likely were conceived in. The big bow window looked west to the mountain” (7). The second window concerns “your” childhood memory of an old beggar woman, “half blind”, “stone deaf” and “not in her right mind”. As she is fumbling at a big garden gate, “you” dismount from “your tiny cycle and open the gate for her” (10-1). Some words of thanks that issued from her are still inscribed in “your” memory: “God reward you little master”. Curiously, she “was sure she could fly once in the air” and launched herself from “a first floor window” (10). The third window is connected with “your” adulthood memory of rendez-vous at the little summer house: “You open with quickening pulse your eyes and a moment later that seems an eternity her face appears at the window”(29). From the fourth window, light shines upon “you” as “you” lay on “your” deathbed: “The low sun shines on you through the eastern window”(44). Thus these four windows vividly reflect the chronology of “your” whole life from birth to deathbed (except death itself). On the other hand, the narrator of Company, who states in the first paragraph: “A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine”(3),
makes only one reference to what might be the same window “you” are looking at:

As the window might close of a dark empty room. The single window giving on outer dark. Then nothing more. No. Unhappily no. Pangs of faint light and stirrings still.

(15-6)

If we assume that the fourth and the fifth windows are the same and that “you” and “one in the dark” signify the same person, the statement that “The place is windowless”(44-5) issued by the narrator in the penultimate paragraph contradicts the voice’s previous remarks concerning the same window. As a result, unable to judge whether there is a “single window”, or that there are at least two windows (as the phrase “the eastern window” does imply), the readers would be driven into a state of epoché. After all, there is no window in the place, and there is nothing but “the fable of one with you in the dark”(46).

Just as, in Watt, Beckett describes the relationship of Watt/ Sam (the narrator) as “in our windowlessness” (150), “one in the dark”/a voice/the narrator in Company are all in their “windowlessness”.

Before we conclude that the window in Beckett is a simulacrum, an illusionary device in disguise, we need to investigate two more windows. Note that Murphy’s garret has a window whose view is consistently dark:

But the garret that he now saw was not an attic, nor yet a mansard, but a genuine garret, not half, but twice as good as the one in Hanover, because half as large. The ceiling and the outer wall were one, a superb surge of white, pitched at the perfect angle of furthest trajectory, pierced by a small frosted skylight, ideal for closing against the sun by day and opening by night to the stars. (1993, 93, my italics)

Seen from these phrases like “[a] small frosted skylight” that commands “only that most dismal patch of night sky” (106), and “the skylight, open to no stars”(141), Beckett's intention that the skylight should command no view is clear. Moreover, Beckett’s specific concern for the viewless window is confirmable in his manuscript:
“fenêtre borgne, donnant du jour mais pas de vue”. It is this “small frosted skylight” of Murphy’s garret that is to become the prototype of Beckett’s windows because of its closedness, its viewlessness, and thereby its virtual windowlessness.

Beckett continues to use the image of the closed window until his last, for the “one high window” in the chamber of a dying old man in Stirrings Still “was not made to open”, nor he “could or would not open it” anyway.

Why he did not crane out to see what lay beneath was perhaps because the window was not made to open or because he could or would not open it. Perhaps he knew only too well what lay beneath and did not wish to see it again. So he would simply stand there high above the earth and see through the clouded pane the cloudless sky.

Unable to move, the moribund old man now “sat at his table head on hands” and “saw himself rise and go”. Yet, he used to mount a stool to see the sky. This image of the old man on a stool seeing “through the clouded pane the cloudless sky” reminds us of Clov in Endgame trying to get an outside view on a ladder, and, originally, that of Murphy on a rocking chair looking through “a small frosted skylight” the starless night sky. To all of them, the window must be closed for the author to depict their souls apart from the world and their issuelessness of present conditions.

Significantly enough, Beckett writes a Leibnizian key word about the last old man in the manuscript of Stirrings Still: “So dark in his windowless self that no knowing whether day or night”. In the published text, Beckett wrote simply “One night or day” and erased this phrase “in his windowless self”. The erased key word suggests that neither “the feeble light” nor “the one high window” in his room is real, but what counts to Beckett is the interior of “his windowless self”. In any case, it is quite noteworthy that Beckett is so preoccupied with a key concept of Leibniz’s monadology in his creation of mysterious windows in both Murphy and Stirrings Still.
2. Inside/Outside

If Beckett’s window is practically “windowless”, the alleged inside/outside partition of the room occupied by Malone and others is also, for the same reason, fallacious. And yet Malone draws a contrast between outer light and inner light:

The light is there, outside, the air sparkles, the granite wall across the way glitters with all its mica, *the light is against my window, but it does not come through*. So that here all bathes, I will not say in shadow, nor even in half shadow, but in a kind of a leaden light that makes no shadow, so that it is hard to say from what direction it comes, for it seems to come from all directions at once, and with equal force. […] In a word *there seems to be the light of the outer world*, [...], *and mine.*

(220-1, my italics)

As in *Endgame*, however, “the light of the outer world” does not reach Malone, while “a kind of a leaden light”, or the light of “mine” which might be termed as “the light of the inner world” fills in his room. Indeed, the contrast of outer and inner appears to be made clear. On the other hand, Malone does not know where he is: “Unfortunately I do not know quite what floor I am on, perhaps I am only on the mezzanine”(218). Then he comes to a conclusion that he is “in a kind of vault”, and that the space which he takes to be the street is “in reality no more than a wide trench or ditch with other vaults opening upon it”. At last, Malone goes so far as to doubt the validity of his conclusion:

In which case the question arises again as to which floor I am on there is nothing to be gained by my saying I am in a basement if there are tiers of basements one on top of another.⁹ (219)

This is how Beckett leads Malone into the abyss of infinite space where the distinction of inside and outside, if any, does not make sense; how can he find where he is in infinity? Then the division of the inner/outer light falls to the ground, too. In effect, for Malone,
there is no outside, no outer light. In his words, “it is never light in this place, never really light” (220).

Moreover, the nature of light in Beckett is not physical but metaphysical; in the physical world, there is no light with no shadow, no source. Still, even the outside light described in an addendum of *Watt* is: “[t]he source of the feeble light diffused over this scene is unknown” (1978, 249). Also in the stage direction of *Ghost Trio*, we find a strange, and yet similar combination of window and light to that of *Malone Dies* mentioned above: “The familiar chamber. At the far end, a window. The light: faint, omnipresent. No visible source. As if all luminous. Faintly luminous. No shadow” (1990, 408).

Of the bizarre light whose source is unknown as well as the invalid distinction between inside/outside, Beckett creates them not by caprice but by applying a monadic principle to the description. The fact that Watt’s internal world mirrors everything that happens outside it stems decidedly from the monadology. In Mr. Knott’s house, Watt talks about his strange feeling:

> my personal system was so distended at the period of which I speak that the distinction between what was inside it and what was outside it was not at all easy to draw. *Everything that happened happened inside it, and at the same time everything that happened happened outside it.*

(1978, 41-2, my italics)

With this monadic perception Watt becomes so synonymous with the world surrounding him that he feels, “I was the sun, need I add, and the wall, and the step, and the yard, and the time of year, and the time of day”(40). Watt accepts the sensation as “harmony”, not as confusion, or madness, at least at the beginning of his stay in Mr. Knott’ house:

> The sensations, the premonitions of harmony are irrefragable, of imminent harmony, when *all outside him will be he*, the flowers the flowers that he is among him, the sky the sky that he is above him, the earth trodden the earth treading, and all sound his echo.

(39, my italics)
It is this singular perception that causes an epistemological crisis in Watt, and which finally drives him mad. Leibniz calls this “apperception” which means perception with more or less clarity given to “every created monad” that “represents the entire universe” (Leibniz, 25). Ironically, a perfect concord with the mind (inside) and the material (outside) is for Leibniz harmony; for Beckett disharmony. Yet the monadic space both offer is similar. In a word, the monad is “the autonomy of the inside, an inside without an outside” (Deleuze, 28).

3. Closed Interior: Microcosm

Being windowless signifies that monads have no means for communication with others. That means solipsism. Elsewhere Leibniz writes:

> But monads alone do not make up a continuum, since, in and of themselves, they lack all connection, and each monad is, as it were, a world apart.\(^{12}\)  

(Leibniz, 1989b, 206)

For Leibniz, what sustains the windowlessness of isolated monads is the doctrine of the pre-established harmony whereby neither the mental nor the material has any direct effect on the other, and yet both are preprogrammed to act in perfect harmony. Beckett’s attitude toward Leibniz is a blend of the pros and cons. Although he frequently shows his indignation against this principle of Leibniz, Beckett still uses it and twists it in various ways, driving his characters to struggle within and without. Consider Murphy, who suffers from his madly beating heart; who suffers from being with other people, so that he searches for “absolute freedom” in the depth of his mind by binding his body to a rocking chair. Despite such conflict Beckett delivers, Murphy’s mind is modeled after the monadic principles. Like a monad, he neither has means of communication between himself and others, nor between his mind and his body. Like a monad, his microcosm is “hermetically closed”, preprogrammed, and represents “the universe”.

Murphy’s mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without. This was not an impoverishment, for it excluded nothing that it did not itself contain. Nothing ever had been, was or would be in the universe outside it but was already present as virtual, or actual,
or virtual rising into actual, or actual falling into virtual, in the universe inside it.\textsuperscript{13}
\hfill (1993, 63)

Comparing this to Leibniz’s assertion that “Every individual substance [monad] contains in its perfect notion the entire universe and everything that exists in it, past, present, and future”,\textsuperscript{14} it would be difficult to deny Beckett’s debt to the monadology. Of course, close inspection will reveal that Beckett is twisting and reversing the monadology secretly and yet importantly by changing Leibniz’s “plenum” into “hollow”; by modifying the Aristotelian-Leibnizian teleological “virtual-actual” (one-way) traffic into more or less the Bergsonian-Deleuzian free randomness in which there are both “virtual-actual” and “actual-virtual” (two-way) traffics.\textsuperscript{15}

In fact, the chaotic virtual-actual relationship modified by Beckett comprises quintessential problematics for both Leibniz and himself, because it disintegrates teleology, determinism, and pre-established harmony. Watt has a celebrated example of this sort. Describing the endless arrivals and departures of servants at the house of Mr. Knott in a sort of binary progression (invented by Leibniz), Beckett writes ironically: “the notion of the arbitrary could only survive as the notion of a pre-established arbitrary” (132).

Beckett’s debt to Leibniz and his mixed drive for the philosopher, expressed especially in the passage of “Murphy’s mind”, seems to be his own, as seen in a letter to MacGreevy, written in 1937:

\begin{quote}
The real consciousness is the chaos, a grey commotion of mind, with no premises or conclusions or problems or solutions or cases or judgements. I lie for days on the floor, or in the woods, accompanied and unaccompanied, in a coenaesthetic of mind, a fullness of mental self-aesthesis that is entirely useless. The monad without the conflict, lightless and darkness. \hfill (Knowlson, 269)
\end{quote}

Like Murphy’s closed mental space, the interior of his consciousness is neither orderly nor teleological, but it is “the chaos” and “a fullness of mental self-aesthesis that is entirely useless”. It is certainly “reminiscent of Murphy’s lowest zone of mind” (Knowlson), where “there
was nothing but commotion and the pure forms of commotion” and where “he [Murphy] was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom” (1993, 66). Yet Beckett expects the monad to be, unlike Leibniz’s, “without the conflict, lightless, and darkless”.

The way in which Beckett twists the monadology has been shown to have a certain disposition. While he follows Leibniz in that each monad is isolated, self-contained and has no interaction with others, the microcosm reflects the universe from a particular point of view; he reverses Leibniz in that the Beckettian monads are far from being in harmony, and that everything is so pre-established that this is the best of all possible worlds.

Of Beckett’s solipsism, it is quite proper for Dowd to direct his attention to what Beckett calls “baroque solipsism” in a letter written in 1935 (Dowd, 15). Also, as early as in 1930, in his early essay on Proust, its first symptom may be read:

We are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known. ‘Man is the creature that cannot come forth from himself, who knows others only in himself, and who, if he asserts the contrary, lies’

(1970, 66)

Thenceforth such a view held by Beckett will remain unchanged to his last. Beckett creates one solipsistic monad after another:

It is clear we have here two distinct and separate bodies, each enclosed within its own frontiers, and having no need of each other to come and go and sustain the flame of life, for each is well able to do so, independently of the other. (1958, 238.)

What Malone says about the view of a couple “loving each other” from his so-called “painted” window is a product of Beckett’s ironic application of the monadic independence to his works, like a frog chorus in Watt (135-7), the complicated dance of bees in Molloy (168-9) and a series of automated dance by the four dancers in Quad. Accordingly, even their “loving each other” can be explained by their “windowlessness”, that is, by the pre-established harmony with no a posteriori interaction.

366
Conclusion

Beckett’s refutation of Leibniz is abundant but partial, for he never denies the total framework of the pre-established harmony. Thereby a paradox is inevitable for the Beckettian protagonists. That which Beckett calls “a pre-established arbitrary” in *Watt* may deny the “harmony” of monads, but not the premises: determinism and windowlessness. That Murphy’s consciousness is composed of two-way traffic may dislocate the teleology, suggesting the possibility of freedom. Yet how can one be free in the pre-established universe, in the windowlessness? Beckett neither evades the paradox, nor criticizes it straightforwardly. Instead, he lets his protagonists (and even the beings that they created) face the paradox until their agony becomes unbearable and absurd. The window device and the “windowless self” have always played a major part, explicitly or implicitly, in Beckett’s expressions of solitary souls.

Notes

1. Garin Dowd’s “Nomadology: Reading the Beckettian Baroque” is the most important essay written in this context since Germane Brée.

2. This Latin dictum is half repeated by a parrot in *Malone Dies*. See James Knowlson (374).

3. See Naoya Mori’s “Leibniz in Beckett: Beckett’s Windowlessness” (Mori 12). See also Dowd (24).

4. *Compagnie*, the French version of *Company*, recalls the two windows of *Endgame*, where “the eastern window” is “la fenêtre côté mer” (1980, 83).

5. In “Verbatim”, the earliest manuscript version of *Company*, Beckett writes: “Speech by A overheard by B described to C, i.e. recta converted to oblique. A, B, C, one & the same.” (Reading University Library MS2901)

6. It is well known that, in translating *Murphy* into French, Beckett added the name of Leibniz to this passage: “Murphy avait occupé à Hanovre, assez longtemps pour faire l’expérience de tous ses...
avantages, une mansarde dans la belle maison renaissance de la Schmiedestrasse où avait vécu, mais surtout où était mort, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz” (1965, 119).

7. Reading University Library MS3000 (Whoroscope notebook)

8. Reading University Library MS2935/1.

9. Quoting the passage from Malone Dies, Dowd makes a reference to “Leibniz’s great pyramid in the Theodicy” which has “an apex but no base; it went on increasing to infinity” (Dowd, 25). Deleuze, in Le pli, to which Dowd probably owes much, compares the Leibnizian monad to Baroque architecture: “The Leibnizian monad and its system of light-mirror-point of view-inner decor cannot be understood if they are not compared to Baroque architecture. […] The monad is a cell. It resembles a sacristy more than an atom: a room with neither doors nor windows, where all activity takes place on the inside” (Deleuze, 28). In a wider context, Malone’s horror of infinity may be explained in what Deleuze claims “l’univers en escalier de la tradition néo-platonicienne”(41), or it may be compared to Pascal’s horror vacui, as Dowd suggests elsewhere (Dowd, 18). See §189 and §201 of Pensées.

10. The same sort of phenomenon takes place in Malone: “You may say it is all in my head, and indeed sometimes it seems to me I am in a head”. See Dowd (26).

11. “Beckett is reducing”, wrote Brée, “ad absurdum Leibniz’s well-known assertion “that the individual notion of each person involves once and for all everything that will ever happen to him” (573).

12. Leibniz to Des Bosses, 29 May 1716.

13. A related statement by Leibniz is: “Thus each individual substance [monad] or complete being is as a world apart, independent of every other thing except God. There is no stronger demonstration, not only that our soul is indestructible, but also that it preserves always within its nature the traces of all its preceding conditions with a virtual memory which can always be awakened because the soul has consciousness of, or knows within itself, that which each
one calls ‘myself.’” (Leibniz, a letter to Arnauld, dated July 14, 1686). (Leibniz, 1989a, 337).

14. See Leibniz’s, “Primary Truths” (Leibniz, 1989b, 32), and the Monadology, §22.

15. See Henri Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant.*

16. Molloy echoes this principle: “In my head there are several windows, that I do know, but perhaps it is always the same one, open variously on the parading universe” (1958, 68).

17. Deirdre Bair writes: “He [Beckett] could find no relief in anything but what he called baroque solipsism” (Bair, 198).

18. In “Proust”, Beckett uses some of Leibniz’s terminology: “occult arithmetic” (91) and “impenetrability” (63).

**Works Cited**


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369


