

Marialena Avgerinou

Wittgenstein's language and Beckett: the limits of language and the absurd

Abstract This paper provides a parallel linguistic and conceptual reading of Wittgenstein's and Beckett's works. More specifically, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* are looked at in relation to the absurd plays *Not I* and *Waiting for Godot*, respectively. The limits of language as described in the *Tractatus* are part of the verbally and conceptually asphyxiating world brought on stage by Beckett in the monologue *Not I*, while the transition to 'language games' of the *Philosophical Investigations* can be identified in parts of *Waiting for Godot*. The suggested conclusion is that Wittgenstein's expression of the ineffable, the problematic use of language and (its) meaning can be and have been expressed in a form of art, while the meanings of Wittgenstein's writings are in harmony with their stylistic form, his concept of 'showing' further illustrating this idea.

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Wittgenstein had said that 'Philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry' (Wittgenstein 1980:24e), potentially showing that art can communicate effectively what commonly used philosophical language can only touch upon. It can be argued that the form of Wittgenstein's writings is firmly connected with the message he is trying to convey despite its not being poetry. In this essay, I will explore the possibility of looking at Wittgenstein's two main works, the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, in parallel with two of Beckett's plays: *Not I* and *Waiting for Godot*, all in reference to Wittgenstein's idea of 'showing'. At the same time, I will argue for the intrinsic connection between form and content in philosophical writing which derives from the conclusions drawn in reading Wittgenstein and perceiving philosophical concepts.

In his early philosophy, Wittgenstein discusses the problems arising from the inefficiency of language in effective or meaningful communication, while he later moves on to discuss language as a form of life. These concerns have been illustrated in literature, especially in the surreal or absurd movement. Samuel Beckett's writings can be read as 'the most Wittgensteinian of parables' (Perloff 1996: 21) insofar as they treat language in a similar way: looking for its potentialities, boundaries, or the interesting and important yet neglected implications of trivial, ordinary words. Beckett is an example of a

language-conscious writer, creating language-games that reveal language's inadequacy to convey meaning, possibly in a Tractarian way. In other words Beckett recognizes 'the inherent inability of words to correspond to anything other than themselves together with the potentiality of expressing this very inability to express' (Velissariou 1982). Both Wittgenstein and Beckett wrote on language, and recognised the paradox of doing so since they expressed the contradictions, misunderstandings or meaninglessness of words. Yet, neither could escape the necessity of language, Beckett responding to this by saying that 'words are all we have' (Cavell 1976: 161). Furthermore, Beckett employed language as a form of art, which can be read in line with Wittgenstein's distinction between 'saying' and 'showing'; in reference to *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett said that all he knew he showed (Cohn 2006: 122).

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Wittgenstein's use of language makes us conscious of writing style as reflecting the message. This could be true both for his early and later philosophy, as exemplified in the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein's very language on language indicates that philosophy and literary style are not separate, as the form mirrors the context and content. The *Tractatus*, arguing for the impossibility of articulating anything meaningfully except for propositions on the natural sciences, is itself written in the most laconic, scientific way possible. The author is conscious of the paradox that he cannot escape using metaphors, speaking in abstract terms and creating imagery, to argue for the opposite use of language and that is why he sees this project as a ladder to be kicked away. In embracing the impossibility of that impossibility, the language of the *Investigations* is inclusive, playful, and diverse. Here, language is seen as an expression of forms of life, involving different language-games. However, both works accept language as an intrinsic part of human life, and make reference to the problems arriving from our misconceptions of it. They reflect the author's desire for clarity, precision, and logic -even when the latter is found to be inadequate in his philosophical enquiry. This is evident in their form: they are both written as enumerated lines of thoughts, rather than conventional philosophical essays. The works could not have been written in a different way, 'because otherwise the thoughts [they] present would have been crippled' (Binkley 1973: 8). This is not to say that Wittgenstein's prose cannot be paraphrased, but that the way he writes is an essential part of the thinking process behind the written result.

1. The Language of the *Tractatus* and the limits of language

The language of the *Tractatus* is as close to its meaning as possible -concise, scientific and seemingly propositional. Wittgenstein attempted to create a text composed of seven dense statements, each expanded into some further comments. The message of the *Tractatus* appears to be that language cannot

be used to meaningfully describe ethical concerns, since logic and determinacy of sense are its essential grammatical rules. By logically analysing language we find its limits, and then we come to see the limits of sensical thought (Wittgenstein 2007: 27). The preface, written in familiar prose instead of numerated thoughts, gives a more conventional understanding of what will follow. Wittgenstein did not provide extensive arguments developing his ideas, but rather gave extremely scrutinised assertive statements to demonstrate them. This is further illustrated by his comparing the *Tractatus* with a ladder leading to the conclusion, which has to be kicked away once it has been climbed (6.54) (Wittgenstein 2007: 108).

Wittgenstein's ideas have been described as challenging, and the language he uses to show them has been seen as problematic in accessing them (Pitcher 1964:17). To a certain extent, this is true. Further explanation is often constructive and necessary for his philosophy to be understood, while paraphrasing helps in comprehending his ideas; thus, the value of the relevant bibliography in this essay, or a university-level course. After all, 'the results of a great deal of profound thinking are presented rather than the actual process of the thinking itself' (Pitcher 1964:17) However, it can also be argued that his language is not some kind of enigma, but rather the reflection of the very thoughts expressed. Therefore, his choice of words cannot be substituted by mere explanation in more familiar, extensive terms, without the awareness of them being a *replacement*, with all the inadequacies or problems this may have. There is thus the possibility of looking at this project as 'performance' philosophy.

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According to Fogelin, what Wittgenstein has achieved is the 'embodying' of the language he speaks of, in the language he uses (Fogelin 1987:102). What is being said is essentially connected, or in 'harmony' (Gibson 2004) with how it is being said. To bring this into a wider context, even though this is most often the case for the arts and the very forms of artistic expression, philosophy too cannot escape the medium through which it is expressed (Binkley 1973: 6). In contrast to presupposing an internal idea of the thought as an independent entity in the mind, which then finds a medium for expression -in this case, writing- we could argue that the idea manifests itself simultaneously as the process of writing it takes place. In a further development of this point, Wittgenstein argues in the *Investigations* that 'language itself is the vehicle of thought' (PI 329) (Wittgenstein 2009: 113e), yet the message of the *Tractatus* is that these very thoughts are nonsensical if they are not logical.

From the point of view of the *Investigations*, the *Tractatus* consists of one language-game, with very specific rules. Wittgenstein cannot escape using metaphors and abstractions such as 'ought' and 'must' that appeal to value instead of logic in the *Tractatus*, and so ends up using non-sensical or metaphysical terms

to describe the 'sensical'. The limits of language are thus portrayed in the very inability of the author to put forward his idea of not using language through a different mean other *than* ordinary language. Fogelin specifically describes this division as 'object language' and 'metalanguage' (Fogelin 1987: 102). The interesting metaphor found in the *Lecture on Ethics* makes a parallel of language to the walls of a cage (Wittgenstein, internet). Similarly, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein creates the analogy of language as clothing, covering thoughts:

4.002 Language disguises the thought; so that from the external form of clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought they clothe, because the external form of the clothes is constructed with quite another object than to let the form of the body be recognized. (Wittgenstein 2007: 45)

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Wittgenstein was cautious and aware of the use metaphors as they could be misleading, or taken too far. For example, the walls of the cage can point to the fact that a cage has bars, and thus we could see outside of it, while being unable to actually reach what is there. The idea that we can see but cannot touch the ineffable is pertinent to the notion of showing, which as aforementioned makes sense in the world of art. But comparing language to the limits of a cage or to the deceiving properties of clothing, seem to be examples that portray his ideas effectively. Specifically in the latter case, language is described not only as a limiting form of expression, but a misleading one. It both hides and deforms the thought it encloses.

4.121 That which mirrors *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by language. The propositions *show* the logical form of reality. They exhibit it.

4.1212 What *can* be shown *cannot* be said. (Wittgenstein 2007: 53)

In reference to the notions of saying and showing, Wittgenstein asserted that what is not factual is ineffable, but it can be *shown* or shows itself. Since art is part of the aesthetical, non-scientific world, what can be expressed through art is in effect done so through showing. Despite the fact that what is shown might be non-sensical from a strictly positivist perspective, it has the potential to portray that very notion of the impossibility of expression. The ambiguity of the notion of showing has been widely debated. If we loosely speak of showing in terms of the arts and not only as a passive process, Beckett's absurd theatre demonstrates the limits of language exceptionally. His plays have been interpreted in many different ways, but most interpretations have found the author cold. In attempting to read Beckett's work with reference to Wittgensteinian perspectives on language, there is the possibility of attributing the wrong meanings. Nonetheless, it is most definitely the case that his plays are highly conscious of linguistic absurdity and the difficulty of expression. The limits of language described in the *Tractatus* are part of the universe brought on stage by Beckett.

II. Beckett - the Absurd

Not I



A scene from Billie Whitelaw's performance, London, 1973

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The play in one act *Not I* is a monologue, essentially about the self as the object: the subject can only refer to itself in the third person. The stage directions require only the mouth of the actor to be visible. The mouth is articulating apparently nonsensical sentences in an attempt to describe thoughts on the subject's life. The effect of these stage directions generates a discomforting, nauseating feeling to the audience, perhaps much like the very feeling of the inability of expression. What is important cannot be said, and so what is said are only fragments of thoughts that if put together can create what resembles a story. To illustrate this point, Beckett chooses to write a play and not a novel, therefore literally showing by a sense-provoking medium the ideas he wants to lay forward. The method of not having the words placed together in a conventional way brings the focus not on the story of the Mouth, which is seemingly unimportant as it is hardly comprehensible, but on the very language employed. The lack of coherent language shows exactly its inadequacy to convey a set meaning. It could be argued that the play is about meaninglessness, only insofar as Wittgenstein is. The play does not necessarily imply the lack of meaning, but the inability to express things *meaningfully*.

'... when suddenly she realized ... words were- ... what? ... who? ... no! ... she! (*pause and movement 2*) ... realized ... words were coming ... imagine! ... words were coming ...'

'... and yet in the ordinary way ... not felt at all. ... so intent one is ... on what one is saying ... the whole being ... hanging on its words. ... so that not only she had ... had she

... not only had she ... to give up. ...' (Beckett 1976: 597)

In performance, it might appear that the mouth is rambling, yet there is also an awareness of a coherent structure of the text. The flow of words, whether connected or seemingly irrelevant to one another can be seen as a demonstration of the flow of thoughts. *Not I* can be read as a manic inner monologue, sometimes resembling a dialogue of which we only see and hear one subject. Repetition is key, and what is often repeated is the inability of Mouth to express herself with words. Arguably, 'it is a text which eludes meaning by permanently pointing to its lack' (Velissariou 1993), through the incoherent language employed, and the refusal of Mouth to refer to herself as the subject 'I'. The absurdity of the play is found both in the language used and the choice of staging, possibly being a response to the absurdity of humans' overall search for meaning, especially through language. The limits of language identified by Wittgenstein are therefore realised through a parallel perspective in absurdist theatre.

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The equivalent of the term 'absurd' in Greek is *paralogo* (παράλογος), literally meaning what is next to thought, logic or linguistic expression. In this respect, the absurd, or in Wittgenstein's terms the nonsensical, is not entirely outside of logic or sense, but in close proximity to it. The word *paralogo* makes sense only insofar as *logos* does. The Tractarian ineffability may be coinciding with this notion of absurdity shown in Beckett's theatre. Logic, structure and thought do exist, but there is an alternative sphere of absurdity, which addresses the nonsensical parts of thinking or existing. To a certain extent, this is in line with the absurdist philosophy of Camus, and the Sisyphean never-ending struggle up the hill. Such readings of Beckett's plays, focusing on an absurdist response to the absurdity of human life, by using nonsensical language, have been both accepted and criticised. Writing in the late 1960's, Cavell stated that they are nothing 'more than impositions from an impression of fashionable philosophy' (Cavell 1976: 115). Yet, in being conscious of that, Cavell also accepted parallels between Wittgenstein's views on language and Beckett's world. More closely related to the *Investigations*, Cavell noted that despite the difficult of expression, we are compelled to speak 'whether we have something to say or not'. Whether what we can say is meaningful or not is not relevant. Our desire to do so is more accepted in Wittgenstein's later work. Wittgenstein embraced the notion of different forms of life and their linguistic expressions, which solve some of the main problems raised in the *Tractatus*. That is, language was no longer seen as capable only of describing the natural sciences, and so the problem of ineffability became almost a non-problem. Yet Wittgenstein still did not talk about values and ethics specifically. In quoting Pascal, Cavell agrees that 'all the evil in the world comes from our inability to sit quietly in a room.' (Cavell 1976: 161). Once more, Wittgenstein's final proposition of the *Tractatus* is relevant.

Beckett's response to these concerns manifest themselves in a variety of forms, *Not I* presumably illustrating the problem of meaningful expression by pointing directly towards the problems of language, as well as notions of solipsism and verbal self-constraint. In other words, 'by making language not only the means, but the very object of his writing, [Beckett] focuses on the crisis of the subject's relation to language.' (Velissariou 1993). The solipsistic message of the *Tractatus* (5.6) cannot be expressed in propositional terms, but Wittgenstein asserts that 'what solipsism *means* (...) shows itself.' (5.62). That is, it is somehow understood, or makes itself manifest in the world. The mysticism of these types of concepts in the *Tractatus*, especially when Wittgenstein mentions meaning, are to a great extent ambiguous. Beckett's response to such notions of solipsism are reflected in *Not I*, where the 'I' problematically becomes the object. Throughout the play, the problem is the difficulty and absolute denial of Mouth to identify herself as the subject: essentially, the 'I' cannot be the object, despite any efforts to make it the observable. (Pitcher 1964: 146).

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III. Language-games

Waiting for Godot



A scene from the first production of *En Attendant Godot*, Paris, 1953

Wittgenstein's Tractarian perception of language as efficient only for the natural sciences is found in interpretations of Beckett's plays. With reference to language's problem of meaningful communication or expression in *Waiting for Godot*, it has been argued that 'only a Naturalistic view of language as having a direct and unambiguous relation to the world can allow for an unproblematic organization of meaning.' (Velissariou 1982). Beckett uses various 'language-games' to express this problem, and breaks the boundaries of the form he uses. In this play, the two main characters are waiting for someone who will never appear. The time, space as well as any context is

unidentified. Essentially, nothing happens: their dialogue does not bring any conclusions, and their encounter with a man and his slave brings no further light to any logical sense of their waiting. The dialogues taking place include continuous repetition, and the meaning seems often to be meaninglessness, or the struggle for (its) expression.

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In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein wants to investigate the trained ways of perceiving, under which we fail to recognize the obvious, which philosophy tends to abstract from (PI 131) (Wittgenstein 2009: 56e). In this line of thought, *Waiting for Godot* obstinately focuses on the trivial, obvious and common communication, to point specifically at its significance. By knowing the rules of the game (dramatic language), Beckett can break it -and by making the ordinary extraordinary, create a joke. Moreover, by drawing attention to trivial conversations, combined with brief word exchanges on happiness, truth and God, Beckett shows that we use the same tool to explain things that are seemingly antithetical. How can we talk about carrots and shoes, using the same mean as we use for describing emotions or the divine? His characters seem unaware of the fact that they are essentially playing games with language, focusing more on how the words sound, rather than what they mean.

If *Not I* was to an extent a Tractarian play, *Waiting for Godot* can be read more closely with the *Investigations*, and not impossibly as an extensive expression of remark 129 of PI: 'The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity'. (Wittgenstein 2009: 56e). Language is as important and complex, as it is familiar and apparently simple, and Beckett points directly to the form of language, the sound rather than the meaning of words, to emphasize their ways of use. Noticing that

Beckett expresses the notion that 'out of its failure to express, language may be re-created,' (Velissariou 1982) he reflects the point made by Wittgenstein in arguing for the fluidity of language. (PI 23) (Wittgenstein 2009: 15). The view that meaning cannot be found through language is still pertinent, but in *Waiting for Godot* language-games take up the role of nonsensical disconnected words. Moreover, moving from the 'I' and language as the limit of 'my' world (Wittgenstein 2007: 88), the *Philosophical Investigations* are about the 'we', similarly as *Waiting for Godot* is inclusive of more than one voice. Reading the play as an expression of the message of the *Investigations* can be interesting. The two characters' interaction constitute very different forms of dialogue around completely unconnected topics, and this might be expressing their form of life, or different games within the game of waiting (Nealon 1988: 521). Again, this reading cannot avoid ascribing a specific intention behind Beckett's writing, namely creating a metaphor for existence as a pointless 'waiting' for something that will never occur, while momentarily forgetting their (and *our* own) inability to stop waiting, and act.

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ESTRAGON: Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON: (*despairingly*). Ah! (*Pause.*) (Beckett 1976: 376) (...)

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

They do not move

Curtain (Beckett 1976: 476)

Furthermore, by deforming what we are used to recognizing as important and meaningful, making it irrational or pointless, Beckett creates a joke through the slave's speech:

LUCKY: Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal God quaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights divine apathia divine athabia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell (...) (Beckett 1976: 413)

The speech continues for three pages, and is arguably a reference to pompous language of philosophers, theologians or scientists. Beckett questions the very validity of using language to express truisms by making a parody of it. Would it be taking it too far to assume that Wittgenstein would have laughed in acknowledging this? Beckett had claimed never to have read Wittgenstein, but reading the former's work while looking through the latter's lens can bring an interesting new perspective on philosophical activity.

As *Not I* was written in such a way to convey an asphyxiating sensation, and *Waiting for Godot* included language-games demonstrating a peculiar but perhaps recognizable form of life, the succinct Tractarian language is replaced in the *Investigations* by extensive remarks that employ various methods for expression, an interlocutor often giving the sense of a dialogue. Once more, the message conveyed is relatable to the form. Wittgenstein no longer poses an austere requisite on language's role, but accepts it as an ever-changing activity. Language has a dominant role in the 'sketches' of thoughts Wittgenstein presents (Wittgenstein 2009: 3), while he also moves on to discuss various different topics and themes relating to cognition, psychology and the method of philosophical enquiry. As an attempt to investigate rather than inscribe, the language of his later work employs different forms, and shows that the author is attempting to express a variety of ideas, being aware in his use of language of the problems arising from the theoretical attitude that Beckett ridiculed. Remark #297 goes as far as to pose the question of whether something is boiling in the picture of a boiling pot. Instances like these are found throughout the *Investigations*, pointing to an almost absurd or mad logic. Beckett's characters are essentially caught in a world where these questions constitute many parts of their discourse, which are however left unanswered, or give the impression of an infinite loop in reasoning.

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Finally, it is worth reflecting on the fact that Wittgenstein's radical ideas on language and philosophy were put forward in an innovative way. Being conscious of stylistic importance, he made reference of this in the preface of both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. 'Language-games' is a term seen as 'undefinable' (Perloff 1996: 20), and the range of explanations and perceptions of it makes it more pertinent to Beckett's plays. This is in line with Wittgenstein's family resemblance theory of universals proposed in the *Investigations*, the idea that there are layers of connections between things even when apparently there are no common features. An interdisciplinary perspective between philosophical writing and literary expression can thus be looked at more closely and attentively. The two writers used different language-games to respectively express problems of meaning in the world, the problems of language as a tool, and problems or potentialities of expression through an ever-changing means. Both Wittgenstein and Beckett pushed language it to its very limits, precisely by trying to find the margins, and both recognized the difficulties arising from attributing the wrong assumptions to linguistic expression. As Perloff states, 'Wittgenstein's way of attacking philosophical problems is best called "aesthetic"', and this is done in ways that among others include 'sudden leaps of faith.' (Perloff 1996: 15). This aesthetical approach to Wittgenstein's writing is therefore seen if we closely look at the methods and literary devices he uses in both his early and late philosophy. The ideas underpinned in Wittgenstein's two main works are mirrored in these very

methods. In turn, Beckett shows through unique dramatic forms similar notions of the limits of language, and encourages the audience to constantly be 'suspicious' of words.

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Marialena Avgerinu

Vitgenštajnov jezik i Beket: granice jezika i apsurd

Apstrakt

Ovaj članak daje uporedno lingvističko i pojmovno čitanje Vitgenštajnovih i Beketovih dela. Preciznije, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* i *Filozofska istraživanja* su redom posmatrani u odnosu na komade pozorišta apsurda *Ne ja* i *Čekajući Godoa*. Granice jezika, kako su opisane u *Tractatus-u*, deo su verbalno i konceptualno asfiktikog sveta donetog na scenu od strane Beketa u monologu *Ja ne*, dok prelaz ka 'jezičkim igrama' u *Filozofskim istraživanjima* može da bude identifikovan u delovima *Čekajući Godoa*. Predloženi zaključak jeste da Vitgenštajnov izraz

neizrecivog, problematična upotreba jezika i (njegovog) smisla, može da bude i jeste izražen u formi umetnosti, dok značenja Vitgenštajnovih spisa jesu u harmoniji sa njihovom stilskom formom, dok njegov pojam 'pokazivanja' dalje ilustruje tu ideju.

Ključne reči: Vitgenštajn, Beket, jezik, smisao, apsurd, umetnost.