



EIMEAR MCBRIDE'S *MOUTHPIECES* AND THE USES OF A BECKETTIAN DRAMATIC STRUCTURE FOR MEANING

Mouthpieces de Eimear McBride e a estrutura dramática Beckettiana para criação de significado

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Abstract: This article investigates Eimear McBride's collected mini-plays published as *Mouthpieces* in their written form. Although we do not examine the performance of the plays, a radio production of the plays by RTÉ's Drama On One with actors Eimear McBride and Aoife Duffin sheds light on this discussion. The aim of this paper is to delve into how the pieces stand as responses to Samuel Beckett's legacy in terms of genre and dramatic structure for the construction of their meaning. Furthermore, the presence of elements from other dramatic traditions is highlighted as well, with a quick view of how they influence the structure of the texts. The research also inspects how the hybridity of genres of the pieces, described by McBride as two performances and one prose/performance, influence the topics and meanings of the text, and vice-versa, how the content of the work forms and informs its structure for the creation of meaning. Moreover, there is a brief analysis of how the pieces stand apart and together as three pieces of a single work, offering insight into McBride's newest publication.

Keywords: Eimear McBride; *Mouthpieces*; Radio plays; Samuel Beckett; Hybrid genres.

Resumo: Este artigo investiga as mini-peças de Eimear McBride reunidas e publicadas como *Mouthpieces* em sua forma escrita. Embora não examinemos a performance das peças, a produção radiofônica das peças do canal Drama On One, da RTÉ, com as atrizes Eimear McBride e Aoife Duffin norteia essa discussão. O objetivo deste artigo é investigar como as peças se posicionam em relação ao legado de Samuel Beckett em termos de gênero e estrutura dramática para a construção de seu significado. Além disso, destaca-se a presença de elementos de outras tradições dramáticas, com uma visão rápida de como eles influenciam a estrutura dos textos. A pesquisa também examina como o hibridismo de gêneros das peças, descrito por McBride como duas performances e uma prosa/performance, influencia os tópicos e significados do texto e, vice-versa, como o conteúdo da obra forma e informa sua estrutura para a criação de significado. Além disso, há uma breve análise de como as peças se dividem e se unem como três peças de uma única obra, oferecendo uma visão aprofundada sobre a mais nova publicação de McBride.

Palavras-chave: Eimear McBride; *Mouthpieces*; Peças de rádio; Samuel Beckett; Gêneros híbridos.

Introduction

This article delves into Eimear McBride's mini-plays *Mouthpieces* (2021). Besides *Mouthpieces*, to date, the Irish writer has published three novels: *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016), and *Strange Hotel* (2020). She has also authored a few short stories and essays for the political magazine *Prospect*, *The Guardian*, and *BBC Radio 4*, as well as the non-fiction book *Something Out of Place: Women and Disgust* (2021). She is the recipient of the Women's Prize for Fiction, Goldsmiths Prize, Desmond Elliot Prize, James Tait Black Memorial Prize, Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, and the Irish Novel of the Year Award¹.

Here we look at how the plays are interspersed by various genres and attempt to identify the genres that crisscross them. The plays have been produced for Ireland's national radio broadcast RTÉ and were aired for the only and first time on the 31st of March 2019². Although we do not examine the plays in performance, their radio production, performed by Eimear McBride herself and Aoife Duffin most certainly sheds light on this discussion. This article aims to analyze how *Mouthpieces* stands as responses to Samuel Beckett's legacy in terms of genre and structure. McBride herself (2018) calls the three stories "two performances and one prose/performance", evidencing the hybridity of genres. The writing of the pieces took place during her time as an Inaugural Creative Fellow at the Samuel Beckett Research Center in 2017-2018.

In classical drama, action informs structure, and each part of a classical play works as a functional taking-off point for the next part, climbing toward the resolution (Hasselbach, 1976). The division of acts is more important than the division of the scenes because each act represents one phase of the action portrayed. As Hasselbach presents, "[...] when the dominant structural principle is not teleological motion but associative unfolding of actions, situations or ideas, then the scene becomes the basic structural unit" (1976, p. 26). This means that in plays where the progression of the scenes or acts is not the structure followed by the plot, then the scene itself takes over as the most important, basic structural unit of the dramatic piece. The scene's independence is elevated: since there is no causal relation from scene to scene, the dramatic subject matter also changes into an episodic variation of a central theme (Hasselbach, 1976). One example provided by Hasselbach (1976) is Beckett's *Endgame*, in which, according to him, by omitting the delimitation between the scenes, Beckett emphasizes an inner organization of the play, where consistency of meaning and coherence are the key points. There, the rise and fall of action follow a ratio of 2 to 1, resulting in a lop-sided pyramid structure that is analogous to the conceptual movement of the action, indicating the rise and fall of tension:

What we have in *Endgame* is a dialectical structure, an antithetical design

¹ Unpublished interview with Eimear McBride. The interview took place at UFSC's VI Jornada do Núcleo de Estudos Irlandeses on November 10th, 2022. Soon it will be available at <https://nei.ufsc.br/interviews/>.

² The full production of *Mouthpieces* is available here: Drama On One – *Mouthpieces* by Eimear McBride (rte.ie) (accessed on 23 January 2023).



with features of both closed and open dramatic form: closed form yields pyramid construction, linear movement, unity of action; open form yields an exposition beginning at a time after the actual catastrophe, circular structure of action, discontinuity in the succession of scenes. If these antitheses explain the tensions within the dramatic structure of *Endgame*, there remains the question of which kind of form pre-dominates in dramatic development and in the creation of audience interest and expectations (Hasselbach, 1976, p. 30).

The dialectic of structure and content is also present in McBride's *Mouthpieces*. The work is composed of three non-related scenes that revolve around gender inequality, developing each facet of the topic within a different structure to achieve a particular effect, as will be discussed later in this paper. A few other elements of various theater traditions are also present: from the Greek, the number of actors is very limited, the dialogues (or monologues) are the moving point of the plays, the crisis takes place offstage, and there is no setting (Kenner *apud* Károly, 1996); from Yeats' poetic dramas, there is the symbolic potential of objects and rituals; from medieval plays, one could connect the unique identities and relationships of the characters, which offers the audience ample room for allegorical interpretations of characters (Károly, 1996). Like Beckett, McBride (2021) subdues plot, text, character, action, and dialogues to create unity of expression, in which language is brought to the level of thought. In *Mouthpieces*, there is no setting, and only four voices, three of them being women, and only one being genderless.

On "The Adminicle Exists"

The first mini-play of *Mouthpieces*, "The Adminicle Exists", is a monologue. Its opening stage direction reads simply as "Bare stage. One female voice" (McBride, 2021, p. 5). McBride (2018) refers to this piece as prose/performance in her essay "Reflections on Beckett". The reader/listener follows along the flow of thoughts from an unnamed woman, getting a glimpse of her inner thoughts and most intimate feelings in real time as she guides her mentally troubled partner to a mental health facility to "save him" – or save herself from him, as we realize once she says, "never said I feared you'd kill me in my sleep" (McBride, 2021, p. 9), conveying the depths of her distress. The piece occurs on a journey from the London Underground, with the woman character referring to the places she finds in her way such as Grayish High Road and Tesco, which Brown (2021) implies might be references to Tottenham. Then she arrives at the free clinic, where most of the play unfolds.

Monologues are often correlated with solo performances. They contain a speaker who delivers speeches to an audience, at times addressing audience members themselves, and at times addressing a silent auditor (Wallace, 2006). Those speeches may or may not relay stories – but when they do, they strip away the illusion that the stage provides, so the performer exposes their truest selves to the shock or embarrassment of the confessor or voyeur audience. It is a technique that helps reveal a character's inner life, especially when they develop the stream-of-consciousness technique, disrupting language to portray an emotional landscape (Wallace, 2006).



The protagonist is the only voice throughout the text, but she gives voice to her (male) partner, the receptionist at the clinic, other staff, passersby, and patients as their words are quoted and cited through her voice and her own point of view. Her own words, however, alternate from a simple third-person narration, to sentences directed towards a “you”. This pulls the audience/reader into the story, in the place of the ill husband, whom she seems to have a one-sided conversation with – probably because the couple is alone with their troubles, as it becomes clearer when she says, “I’d like [...] [S]ome fucking family around to offer me a hand” (McBride, 2021, p. 14), enlightening the reader about their lack of a support system.

Therefore, despite the performance being that of a monologue, the way it is structured blends a few different elements from techniques that bring certain effects to the reader/listener. In a way, readers/listeners are following along this woman’s thoughts as they happen, a flow of consciousness addressed to no one in particular, the venting of a distressed mind, with truncated sentences and other linguistic resources to convey feeling and tone, as in “THANK GOD” written in upper-case (McBride, 2021, p.10). On another level, we have the narration or implication of very few actions: “you shout”, “someone opens the door”, giving the monologue a scene that develops from the metro station to the free clinic, and back to the street again, situated in a chronological sequence. We can see the presence of direct speech quotations such as “Just sit back down. How long have you been here?”, when the protagonist speaks, presumably, to a nurse or receptionist. The rawness of the language does imply that the protagonists’ thoughts should not be heard by anyone other than herself, but using this figure of a “you” as the imaginary addressee of the speech makes for an effect achieved by second-person narration.

With regard to this effect, Fludernick (1994) suggests that there are three major genres of second-person texts: the ones where the narrator and the narratee share a fictional past; the second-person stream of consciousness; and the use of second-person pronoun as a metafictional factor of ambiguity. This technique is regarded as postmodern, in the sense that its subversive effect to undermine the realist story-discourse dichotomy proposes that story and discourse are not necessarily distinct elements, but rather that the infraction of the illusion of “reality” established can be regarded as a narrative category, helping explain the meaning of a text (Fludernick, 1994). The relationship between the narratee, the narrator, and the real reader offers what Fludernick affirms to be a “referential slither”, where the “you” of a text is able to address both the reader and a narratee, involving the reader in the narrative by provoking more empathy from the very start. Second-person narrative, reminds Fludernick, tends to be told in the present tense, because discourse, as it unfolds, is what creates the story narrated.

“The Adminicle Exists” moves away from the singular idea of a dramatic monologue in the sense that the narrator, the “I”, witnesses a story from the margins, although she does not simply talk out of an urge for self-expression. Rather, she tells a story where the “you” – her male partner – is offered a glimpse into her thoughts as well as is told a story in which



he participates. The “you” of the story is not the protagonist, but the story does involve him, as is evidenced by lines such as “Ha ha ha, you shout: ‘Shoppers! What wonders you possess!’”, which places this “you” into the scene as an agent, and not merely a witness of the action. Second-person narratives are, however, open to changes on the scale that exists between narration and inner monologue (Fludernik, 1994, p. 289), which does happen throughout the text as well. The feminine voice narrating her thoughts and story is aware that the “you”, in this case, her partner, is not currently capable of making space for her need to express herself, which makes the narration swiftly shift from a glimpse into her inner monologue to a direct conversation with the “you” (although none of it reaches its addressee), intercalated with a real-time narration of what is happening. “I pulled you by the shirt” declares the existence of an “I” who is acting upon a “You”, and then slides seamlessly into “Stop shouting”, a line presumably spoken to the “you” of the story, and that streams into “I am well-behaved”, describing then the figure of an “I”, the narrator, independently from the “you” of the story (McBride, 2021, p. 6-7). There are also stances in which “she”, “he” and “they” appear in the narrative, delineating an invisible line between “I” and “you” – portrayed as a “we”, the couple formed by the woman-narrator and her partner – and the outsiders who only fleetingly participate in it. Dialogue lines blend with inner thoughts and actions with no indication about which is which, structurally portraying the chaos of the narrator’s mind as thoughts and things unfold around her.

Here, it is also possible to observe what Károly (1996, p. 33) calls “dual rhythm” or “dual rhythmic pattern”. The lines are quick, hectic, and tense, placing a spotlight on the delayed rhythm of the character’s thoughts as they unfold in front of the listeners. Broken lines impose a rhythm to the narrative, suggesting the broken rhythm and the interruptions of “I”’s thoughts, making use of the main characteristics of the dual rhythm, namely, repetition of sentences, conversations and themes, and variations within those current elements, bringing significant changes to the meaning of what had been said before, adding to and shifting the lines spoken before.

The alternation between short and long sentences, some of them connected, some not, gives voice to the disconnections and intensity of a distressed mind. The effect is comparable to what Nguyen (2011, p. 8) affirms about Beckett’s “Not I”, since the audience is forced to “create space for the alterity of the Other”. In “Not I”, the nameless, faceless woman, whose identity transcends singularity, holds the audience hostage by mercilessly exposing her pain. That position is given to the protagonist of “The Adminicle Exists”. By voicing her basest instincts and unfiltered thoughts, the “I” of “The Adminical Exists” places herself in a vulnerable position where listeners access her not through their filter of self, their domain of reference, but through her suffering and singular point of view. Raw language, sometimes punctuated by uppercase and truncated words, conveys the claustrophobia of having to hide feelings of fear, disgust, and frustration from the world around her (Duane, 2021), to be perceived as a good person. The situation thrusts the “I” into a caretaking role she never asked or wished for; the circumstances force and expect her to take, as evidenced



by the lines “They ask me to be responsible for ensuring you get it./ ‘Now, you’ll make sure he gets that, won’t you?’/ I’ll handle everything”. If caretaking comes naturally to women in society’s interpretation of femininity, then the protagonist must act no different; and thus, she must maintain a façade of composure and compassion: “I take pride in keeping my own to myself. My face wears pity even if feeling disgust”. This façade also must be kept around the person she could previously let go with, her partner:

But when he smiles at me, I smile back. You may expect me to smile. I will also be good-mannered. I will not shout or show distress. I’ll be pleasant for hours. I am built for this. I possess the stamina for shit. For a woman, I am very sturdily constituted – which is really just as well as this could happen again and again and again. To you. And me (McBride, 2021, p. 13).

This “behind the curtain” feeling intensifies when considering the meaning of the word “Adminicle”, which is twofold: according to the Merriam-Webster (2023) webdictionary, “adminicle” means support, auxiliary. This most likely alludes to how she has to put her partner first and herself second because of his condition, as we can see when she reluctantly allows him to kiss her, even though she does not want to be kissed, and says so out loud to him:

You need though, you need it. No don’t, I say, I don’t want to kiss you now. Here. [small voice, like inner thought] Ever again.
‘I NEED TO. I NEED TO. YOU KNOW IT CALMS ME DOWN.’
Stop shouting. [small voice, like inner thought]
Please stop shouting.
Alright. Anything to
Slither. Your fucking tongue. Getting itself right into my mouth so you will feel better and I will feel?
[small voice, like inner thought] I will be?
But this is happening to you, not me. My body the locator of your self-discipline, it seems. (McBride, 2021, p. 7).

“Adminicle”, however, is also a juridical term meaning corroboratory evidence, which connects to the protagonist’s fear of her partner becoming violent towards her. At the same time that she is helping him, she is also providing tangible legal evidence that he is unwell in case something happens, either to a third person, to her (by his hands), or to himself (by his or her hands, in self-defense, most likely). This all-consuming fear and panic-induced urge to run is masked with strength, disgust, and frustration, but it is the birth of all of those emotions as the protagonist is left alone, defenseless, in the company of a mentally ill and possibly violent man.

On “An Act of Violence”

“An Act of Violence” comprises a surreal interrogation of a woman about the murder of a man. The setting is uncertain, “Bare stage. One figure, ‘E’, female. ‘A’ is a voice, officious, loud, coming from all angles” (McBride, 2021, p. 21). The way this is done conveys a power imbalance between the characters, as the officious and loud voice is omnipresent.



'A' also identifies as a representative, or "ear" of a "collective body", and "mouth" when required, which suggests that this person is privy to interrogating 'E', and is in a position to judge her.

The technique used to delineate the structure of this performance is stichomythia, in which single, and therefore short, dialogue lines alternate in sequence, moving the dialogue forward rapidly and only through speech. The Greek technique consists of quick verbal exchanges between two characters of a play, particularly in tense moments (Pavis, 1998). It gives the impression of a verbal duel as the character's conflict rises to its climax, making for an emotional clash between two different ideas and contexts, despite the commonality of the theme discussed by said characters (Pavis, 1998). It is characterized by antithesis and rhetorical repetition of the opponent's words (Farrell, 2018)³. Lines are epigrammatic, that is, short but cleverly expressed.

Stichomythia in Beckett's drama has turned everyday language into an art form by imprinting rhythm onto it, giving it a sense of shifted reality, without resorting to poetry or fantasy to do so (Liao, 2014). Liao (2014) affirms that Beckett's examples of the application of this technique often imply that the dialogue the audience is witnessing will lead nowhere, neither does it express the thought process of the characters. In this way, communication does not seem to be strictly necessary because it is inefficient in conveying the full weight of oneself and the mind. The characters do not seem to wish to listen to each other, only to speak, which, in turn, denounces "[...] the egocentric mind of modern people", according to Liao (2014, p. 393).

This also applies to "An Act of Violence". "E" and "A" do not seem to listen to each other, except to contest the argument presented on the lines that precede their own. The dialogue that occurs concerns a death, which both characters seem to agree upon: someone killed a man with a knife. The circumstances of this death, however, are mysterious. 'A' tries to force a single interpretation of the event, "it was an act of violence" (McBride, 2021, p. 21). 'E', however, is aware that this interpretation ignores her statement, as she is gaslit by the interrogator, who insists her perspective was "obscured" and her testimony inaccurate. The gendered power imbalance is implicit: 'A' seems to represent the interests of the body

³ One example of this comes from *Antigone*, on the scene of the argument between Ismene and Antigone (source: SOPHOCLES. *Antigone*. 2005. Translated by Ian Johnston, Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada – Revised slightly and reformatted in 2017 and 2019. Available at: <https://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/sophocles/antigonehtml.html>. Access at: 27 Sep. 2022):

ISMENE: But if you're gone,

what is there in life for me to love?

ANTIGONE: Ask Creon. He's the one you care about.

ISMENE: Why hurt me like this? It doesn't help you.

ANTIGONE: If I am mocking you, it pains me, too.

ISMENE: Even now is there some way I can help?

ANTIGONE: Save yourself. I won't envy your escape.

ISMENE: I feel so wretched leaving you to die.

ANTIGONE: But you chose life—it was my choice to die.

ISMENE: But not before I'd said those words just now.

ANTIGONE: Some people may approve of how you think—others will believe my judgment's good.



of the dead man – despite affirming that “all bodies are the same” (McBride, 2021, p. 25), a remark upon which ‘E’ disagrees. There is an excerpt where ‘A’ affirms that their credentials are intact when they are asked about being a representative of the body, to which they merely answer with “I pride myself”. It seems to imply that the dead body may be of more importance than whatever motivations the killer and the witnesses had to do – or refrain from doing – what they did. Furthermore, ‘E’ is not the model witness, especially for a woman: she is well-composed, not emotional, and does not offer much helpful information, as she works around words to avoid lying, but also says as little as possible. Even not fitting into the “hysterical woman” trope – in which lack of conformity to what is culturally established as feminine behavior is irrevocably seen as irrational and unstable (Felski, 1995, p. 182-183) –, her words are disregarded as if she was in a high state of nerves, possibly because of her gender.

While E and A do not disagree about the fact itself, however, there is deep disagreement about the interpretation of the fact. From A’s perspective, there is only one side to be considered – the dead man’s side. His is the body that matters, and its violation is absurd and should result in punishment. His was the body that suffered scratches, slices, a knife penetrating the skin, and organs sustaining damage; he was the one who bled and screamed, demonstrating distress. To E, however, the occurrence was not an act, and neither one of violence: she describes it as an “end”, an act of “joy”, which presses further questions about what happened – especially because there was an audience, so to speak, people who witnessed the murder and did nothing to prevent this death, too exhausted to do anything but offer delayed disapproval, alarm and “perhaps even distress” (McBride, 2021, p. 27). The witnesses, including E, did not try to stop the murder or help the man who was stabbed, even though he did request help and begged for mercy:

A: You did not intercede?
E: I did not.
A: Offered no assistance?
E: The difficulty was no longer mine to resolve. [...]
A: Yet you remained unconcerned:
E: My concerns were elsewhere [...]
A: The victim requested assistance?
E: Yes. A: Begged for mercy?
E: True.
A: This request was ignored?
E: By me.
A: The others present too?
E: Some horror was expressed, but a deaf ear was the favoured consensus (McBride, 2021, p. 25).

The reader/listener is left to imagine the reason why this man had been stabbed, and why no one attempted to help him, making “a deaf ear [...] the favoured consensus” (McBride, 2021, p. 25). This leads to the interpretation that maybe this man deserved it, somehow:

E: It was not an act.
A: What then?
E: Let's say, an end.
A: For the victim?
E: Yes.
A: For the perpetrator?
E: That too.
A: For all concerned?
E: Close enough.
A: Especially for him though?
E: For, but not especially.
A: For who else then?
E: [non-committally] Oh, you know (McBride, 2021, p. 27-28).

The last line of the piece is when the fragile power imbalance shatters and the tables are turned in E's favor, as she implies that A knows the same that she does, but to protect this "collective body", E has turned a blind eye. The man's body was stabbed to death without interference or care, and E's view of what happened disagrees with the interpretation that there was anything violent about it.

On "The Eye Machine"

"The Adminicle Exists" and "An Act of Violence", two mini-plays that portray different but related often-silenced situations of oppression experienced by women, culminate in the last piece: "The Eye Machine". In the last piece of the book, the stage direction suggests a bare black stage for its setting. Over it, eight feet above, there is a woman on a rostrum, with her hands and head strapped to a board, immobile. The delivery of the text should be "rapid, but comprehensible. Human" (McBride, 2021, p. 31). The performance is also a monologue, touching on delicate topics with rawness: the imprisonment of female stereotypes and the discomfort of misogyny. The text uses repetitions, quick alternations between the abstract and the concrete, and a precise economy of language, where the silences and what is not spoken have as much power as what is verbalized (Kelly, 2021). All of this is used to weigh in on the unseen structural misogyny: "If an eye cannot look at itself. [...] If it just belongs to a system of seeing which it cannot impact [...]" (McBride, 2021, p. 33).

Beckett's "Not I" appears to be an important intertext for the interpretation of this piece. "Not I", a dramatic monologue, was written by Samuel Beckett in 1972 and premiered at the *Samuel Beckett Festival* in the same year in New York along with Krapp's Last Tape, taking place at the Forum Theater (Barnes, 1972). Mars-Jones (2014, no page number available) affirms that this piece is "sort of a companion piece to *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958)" as its "female inversion", in the sense that Krapp dwells unhurriedly by the past, while "Not I" is about a woman exploding in unfiltered words, very much anchored in the present (Barnes, 1972). When it comes to "Not I", two of the performances that are considered to be the most significant are the first two, which were directed by Beckett himself, one with actor Jessica Tandy (1972), and the other with Billie Whitelaw in 1973. In both performances, the woman actor had her head strapped to a board so she could not move, and was sensory

deprived, with a thick sheet of black cloth placed in front of her face and only a hole around her mouth. The skin surrounding her mouth was also painted black to place all focus – and light – on it. The mouth became the main and only character of the piece, an “organ of emission without intellect” that delivered words faster than the speed of comprehension. In Beckett’s own words, “I’m not unduly concerned by intelligibility” and “I want the piece to work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect” (Beckett *apud* Browne, 2021). This effect was delivered by the innovative structure of the performance, which invited the audience to feel before making sense of the experience – a sense that would not be universal, but particular to each kind of viewer.

According to Nguyen (2011, p. 3), the immobilization of the actor and isolation from any form of context alter the dynamics of space, visibility, movement, and sonority from how they are perceived in everyday life. Those characters are, therefore, constituted and reduced to their words, and the language used by them, the sounds and rhythm applied by the actors, shift the order of everyday language. Despite lacking sense and subjectivity, the utterances delivered by the character make her come to life. The form of delivery, its speed, and soundings “[...] begs the listener (audience and Inquirer) to face, to host the Other’s pain” (Nguyen, 2011, p. 5). Even the pronouns used by the actor and its constant changes from I, you, it, we, they, are provided to destabilize the audience and call them to listen and experience the mouth’s ability to do regardless of the brain’s requests to slow down to make sense of things (Nguyen, 2011). The Mouth in “Not I” is, according to Cantazaro (1990, p. 42) “condemned to silence” because of patriarchal suppression; alienated and disenfranchised, it loses subjectivity at the same time it rises through her voice.

This experience narrows in McBride’s “The Eye Machine” to a sectional experience – the experience of women. If the eye, she questions, only knows and is created, can only be, what it is shown, and what it is shown is violence (including the violence of having to fit into one stereotype), associated with figures typically associated with “evil” such as Satan and Circe, then it cannot escape it. The piece does not offer a solution or a consolation, leaving the reader/listener with the uncomfortable feeling that this strapped figure, while conscious of everything, is a “powerful eye staring from the depths / of your machine” (McBride, 2021, p. 40), can do just as much as the reader to change the structure that perpetuates this oppression. The title could be a suggestion, as “eye” and “I” are homophones, offering, like the other titles, a dual interpretation of its meaning.

Rhythm and line breaking are important in “The Eye Machine”. In the beginning, the single large block of text offers a metaphorical context, the musings of an overwhelmed, almost unhinged mind, that culminates in the conclusion that

If the eye cannot look at itself. If the eye cannot look at anything else. If the eye cannot look. If it just belongs to a system of seeing which it cannot impact, interpret, depict, construe, transpose, contextualise. That’s the thing. If there is a thing. If the eye – God help us. If the eye – God help us. Sees infinitely, interminably what it is shown. If it knows only what it is shown. If it is created from what is shown. Can be only what it is shown. And what it is



shown is [what does it say?] (McBride, 2021, p. 33).

Then, the single short sentences containing stereotypes and associations socially made with women force the reader to focus on each one of them, their meaning, weight, and importance; however, they are also faced with the fact that the lines do not stop, but continue, always adding to the last. This intense overpowering stacking of meanings, contexts, and concrete social pacts add upon the other word by word, building, like bricks, the structure of the machine that the protagonist speaks about, imprinting on the reader also the feeling of being overwhelmed over how big and invisible the oppression suffered by women is. This haunted woman mirrors the woman in “Not I” in the sense that her voice and presence bring intelligibility to its most visceral state, away from the intellectual scale of understanding. It is a mouthpiece, both in the sense that it relates to Beckett’s play, and that it alludes to the small metallic piece where a musician places their mouth to play a trumpet.

Final remarks

In this article, our aim was to reflect on how *Mouthpieces* was influenced by Beckett’s innovative writing and performances. Although a thorough comparison between *Mouthpieces* and Beckett’s works are beyond the scope of this article, we acknowledge that such a comparison would be fruitful. One important point of contention is that, differently from McBride’s, Beckett’s works did not focus on criticizing gender issues, as some critical approaches may do so nowadays. Nonetheless, there is a growing in trend in the analysis of the roles of women (both as characters and collaborating artists) in Beckett’s works; the special issue “Beckett’s Women Contemporaries” (Nugent, 2023) of the *Journal of Beckett Studies* is a case in point.

It is important to highlight that the three pieces have been written to be performed, as McBride herself says in her article “Reflections on Beckett” (2018), where she refers to the pieces present on *Mouthpieces* as two performances and one prose/performance. They are responses to Beckett’s works, crafted when McBride was an Inaugural Creative Fellow at the Samuel Beckett Research Center in 2017-2018. The performance aspect, the writing of a text as the author imagines it embodied by someone’s presence and voice, gives prominence to those two aspects, as is in music and plays. The rhythm in which the pieces are performed, or better, in which the lines are spoken, as with Beckett’s plays, changes how one perceives the works. Sound and rhythm, like in texts by Beckett, are a “closed place” of recurring rhythm, which intentionally foregrounds the texts and breaks the link between sound and meaning through this sonorous experimentation (Perloff, 1981, p. 204). This means that sound and rhythm help give a sense of what each piece is about, and that the rules and order of language and its references are deliberately broken to convey such meanings (Perloff, 1981). This emphasizes vocalization and provides evidence of McBride’s – and Beckett’s – sense of understanding spoken word and voice as a process, and not an objective final product.

The physical qualities of voice, as Zumthor (1997) affirms, such as tone, timbre,



reach, volume, and register, are connected to the meaning of the words spoken. Performance is, thus, a set of complex actions through which a message is simultaneously transmitted and received in the liminal space of the here and now. They engage the body through physical presence and voice, rejecting textual analysis as a type of analysis that can be adequately applied to unravel the meanings of oral communication. This clarifies why, despite Beckett's disliking to hear his own voice recorded and played to him, whenever he read passages from his plays to his actors, they were often entranced by the quality of his delivery: it is because he understood how the voice, by taking over language, could communicate the unspeakable (Nguyen, 2011). For Browne (2021), McBride bridges language and what cannot yet be understood nor expressed by exploiting language and sound's capacity to represent pre-cognitive and cognitive processes, creating a space where a different sort of consciousness takes place.

Denouncing invisible gender inequalities through art seems to be what *Mouthpieces* came for. It follows the steps of McBride's first published novel, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, and one of the author's most important influences, Irish writer Edna O'Brien (Collard, 2014), through whom she had the revelation that "It was the first time I understood that there was a part of women's lives that had been absent in everything I had read" (McBride, 2014). Language and sound bend and twist in McBride's attempt to build the bridge of intersubjectivity that allows comprehension to achieve the visceral state of the precognitive, blending the line between the audience and the characters' pain – or more precisely, women's pain. McBride, through technique and performance inspired by Beckett's experimental tradition, makes the audience/listeners/readers hostage to the pain caused by patriarchy (Duane, 2021); and the audience, like women, is just as powerless to make this pain stop as the unfiltered female voice comes through on its own right to reveal the deeper truth about the violence of being a woman in today's world.

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