The Leibnizian Monad and the Self through the Lens of Carlo Emilio Gadda's and Samuel Beckett's Writings

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Abstract

This paper examines the reinterpretation of the Leibnizian notion of the monad in relation to the concept of the self by two contemporary twentieth-century European authors, Carlo Emilio Gadda and Samuel Beckett. By analyzing how far they both refashion and distort the rationalist philosopher's terminology and its basic tenets, in particular those relating to the concept of identity, I intend to show how a comparative approach to these two artistic processes brings to light some essential features of both Gadda's and Beckett's notion of identity and its disintegration. As I shall argue, the contrast which transpires between the Leibnizian, divinely inspired theory of pre-established harmony and the two modern authors' critique of the latter highlights some of the main characteristics of the modernist crisis of the unitary idea of the self, and it crystallizes a number of unexpected parallel traits in the oeuvre of the two writers. For this purpose, particular attention will be given to Gadda's early theoretical writings and Beckett's early fiction up to the French Trilogy.

My wider research project centres on a comparative study of the concept of artistic creation in the work of both authors, with a particular focus on their individual techniques of linguistic and narrative displacement. The potential parallels between the two authors have hardly been discussed in secondary literature to date, and Gadda in particular, who is often considered an isolated phenomenon in a national literary context, has not received due attention on a European literary platform.

This paper will examine the refashioning and reinterpretation of the seventeenth-century German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz's concept of the *monad* in the writings of Carlo Emilio Gadda and Samuel Beckett. The aim is to show how the two authors' distortion of the rationalist's notion of the monadic self highlights some of the intrinsically modernist traits of their oeuvre regarding the disintegration of the individual, and how this process is mirrored in their writings. In Charles Taylor's words, 'the need for an escape from the restrictions of the unitary self has […] become

an important recurring theme in this [the twentieth] century'.[1] Whereas the traditional 'ideal of disengaged reason', as Taylor further argues, 'requires a tight centre of control which dominates experience and is capable of constructing the orders of reason by which we can direct thought and life',[2] Gadda and Beckett explore the very fragmentation of this purported centre of the individual. My main argument is based on the claim that the modernists' departure from the unitary concept of the self is precisely what lies at the basis of the two authors' reinterpretation of the Leibnizian notion of the monad.[3] By assessing the affinities between the two accounts, I intend to show that despite their diverse cultural and formative backgrounds there are a number of unexpected parallels in their work which situate both of them in the tradition of European modernism. The potential points of contact in their oeuvres have not received due attention so far, and especially Gaddian criticism is often confined to a prevalently Italian literary setting.

Carlo Emilio Gadda's acquaintance with Leibniz's works is based on his early study of the thinker at an academic level, which prompted him to write his university dissertation on the *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*.[4] Notwithstanding his background knowledge of the topic, Gadda's approach to theoretical discourse has often been characterized as intrinsically literary. Even though his 1928 philosophical treatise *Meditazione milanese* takes inspiration from Leibnizian combinatorial metaphysics, there is no systematic discussion of the philosopher's concepts in his works. Beckett's interest in the German philosopher, on the other hand, is of quite a different nature. Rather than providing an intellectual resource of ideas, Beckett claims that his reading of the *Monadology*[5] furnished him with a creative source of images, as he puts it in the following letter to Thomas McGreevy in 1933: 'Leibniz a great cod, but full of splendid little

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[1] *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 463.
[2] Taylor, p. 462.
[3] What I am referring to here is the characteristic idea of the modernist movement that the self is not part of an *a priori* unity. One of the first thinkers to pronounce this thought was Nietzsche, who is often considered one of the most important precursors of the modernist period. Writers such as D.H. Lawrence, Robert Musil and Marcel Proust, the latter of which speaks of the self as 'plusieurs personnes superposées' (in 'Contre Sainte-Beuve', quoted in R. Quiñones, *Mapping Literary Modernism: time and development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 146), all explore the need to escape the limitations of the traditional idea of the unitary self in their writings.
[4] When embarking on the study of philosophy, Gadda had already obtained a degree in engineering. He never formally graduated in the former subject, though. The dissertation was never handed in and it remains in draft form. Its original title is 'La teoria della conoscenza nei "Nuovi saggi" di G. W. Leibniz', and it was only recently published in *I Quaderni dell'Ingegnere*, ed. by Riccardo Stracuzzi (Turin: Einaudi, 2006), pp. 5-44.
[5] As recent empirical scholarship has revealed, the Irish author's acquaintance with Leibniz appears to have been not only based on the original text, but significantly filtered through W. Windelband's *A History of Philosophy*, from which he copied large sections into a notebook, commonly referred to as the 'Philosophy Notes', in the 1930s. See Matthew Feldman, 'Beckett's Poss and the Dog's Dinner: An Empirical Survey of the 1930s "Psychology" and "Philosophy Notes"', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 13 (2004), 69-94.

pictures.'[6] Lacking any particular enthusiasm for Leibnizian philosophical ideas, Beckett appropriates these 'pictures' as a reserve of inspiration in a prevalently figurative sense.

Let us briefly clarify Leibniz's original meaning of the central notion of the *monad*. The term was first adopted to designate the notion of an individual substance in the late 1690s, and it is introduced as a reaction to Descartes' concept of the 'extended substance' (*res extensa*) in the *Monadology* (1714).[7] The main properties of monads are defined as follows: they are the source of their own activity and they cannot be altered or changed by the direct action of others. Being impervious to any external influence exerted by other monads, the philosopher describes them as 'windowless': 'The Monads have no windows, through which anything could come in or go out.'[8] The Leibnizian emphasis on the absence of windows frequently resurfaces in Beckett's writings. Moreover, for Leibniz the concept of the monad does not exclusively apply to the rational self: he distinguishes carefully between rational souls, like ours, and monads with lesser degrees of consciousness and rationality – what he sometimes calls 'bare monads' – such as animals and 'simple substances' possessing the basic properties of perception and 'appetition'. In order to account for the relations that hold between one substance and another, Leibniz argues that each individual substance or monad reflects the entire world of which it is part, a thesis closely connected with his famous hypothesis of pre-established harmony. All monads are 'pre-programmed' by God even before creation, allowing a perfect coordination and harmony between them.[9] What distinguishes one monad from the other is its individual, momentary perceptions and appetitions. Overall, God is the ordering principle of the multiplicity of relations which constitutes the external world in the Leibnizian universe.

In Gadda's texts, the notion of the monad as the rational self is discussed on several occasions, in particular in *Meditazione milanese*. What transpires in his remarks is a distinct departure from the concept of the monad as a well-delineated, closed ('windowless') unit. His idea of the self as a system as such does not entirely part with the Leibnizian theory, but it

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[6] Letter to MacGreevy, 6 December 1933, in C. J. Ackerley, 'Demented Particulars: The Annotated Murphy', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 7 (1997/1998), p. 103.
[7] The monad's basic characterization in the *Monadology* reads as follows: 'The monad […] is nothing but a simple substance, which enters into compounds. By "simple" is meant "without parts". And there must be simple substances, since there are compounds; for a compound is nothing but a collection or aggregatum of simple things. Now where there are no parts, there can be neither extension nor form [figure] nor divisibility. These Monads are the real atoms of nature and, in a word, the elements of things'. *The Monadology and other Philosophical Writings*, trans. by Robert Latta (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), para. 1-3.
[8] Leibniz, para. 7.
[9] Leibniz, para. 4-7.

distances itself from the claim of an inherent harmony and order subsisting in the monad. In *Meditazione milanese*, which is partly structured around a fictional dialogue between the author and a *critico*, the latter reprimands his interlocutor, claiming that his ideas concerning the 'sistema' are 'antileibniziani', as they depart too far from the philosopher's original concepts:

> I vostri concetti artificiosi sono antileibniziani e rivelano una ignoranza crassa degli elementi d'ogni vera filosofia. Non ricordate che monade o io è un assolutamente semplice: e che la monade è la casa buia senza finestre?...È il chiuso pensiero, puro io, che non ha bisogno di luce dal di fuori, ché ha in sé la luce?[10]

> [*Your artificial concepts are anti-Leibnizian and they reveal a crass ignorance of the elements of every genuine philosophy. Do you not remember that the monad or the self is absolutely simple: that the monad is a dark house without any windows?...It is a closed thought, pure self, which does not require any light from the outside, because the light originates in itself?*]

This purportedly Leibnizian view is then contrasted with Gadda's own acceptance of the term, which stands in stark contrast to that of the seventeenth-century philosopher. Aware of transgressing the territory of his rationalist predecessor, the author consciously distinguishes his idea of the monad from its original meaning. His terminology is distinctly literary:

> Un sistema è invece, secondo le vostre espressioni, un mostro indescrivibile, che fa pettegolezzi con tutti, come certe serve che coinvolgono nella loro curiosità malefica tutti i coinquilini. E qui, presso di voi, si tratta di coinquilini nella casa del mondo universo.

> [*According to your words, though, a system is an indescribable monster, which gossips with anyone, just like certain servants do who involve all tenants in their*

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[10] *Meditazione milanese* in *Scritti vari e postumi*, ed. by Dante Isella (Milan: Garzanti, 1993), p. 804. All translations in this paper marked by [*italics*] are by the author. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

morbid curiosity. And in your case, we are talking about the tenants of the house of the entire world.] (p. 804)

The penetrability of the Gaddian system/individual is thereby held against the 'pure sphere of the self' which the Leibnizian monad represents for the writer. While the philosopher's version provides a clear-cut definition of the individual, Gadda rejects this claim on the basis of his doubts concerning the very feasibility of a definite determination of the self. The latter has rather blurred contours, and he even refers to it as 'una deformazione perenne, che mai non è identic[a] a se stess[a], se non nella grossa apparenza (e qui Leibniz protesterebbe)' [*a perennial deformation, which is at no point identical to itself but in its overall appearance (and here Leibniz would object)*] (p. 760). Hence for Gadda the self is a system in constant movement, an agglomeration of relations which are defined only with reference to their particular spatial and temporal allocation. It lacks a definite substance and cannot be conceived as a unity. He is aware that Leibniz would not agree with his interpretation of the monad as a continuously changing collection of attributes, whereas the philosopher would consent to his idea of the self as a system divided into further sub-systems. The difference lies in the rational order of the Leibnizian self, which stands in stark contrast to the Gaddian 'impossibilità di chiusura di un sistema (di cui) qualcosa rimane sempre di inspiegato, [...] sia esso l'Io di Fichte; o il Dio di Spinoza; [...]; o la monade bruniana o leibniziana'. [*impossibility of closure of a system, a part of which always remains unexplained, […] be it Fichte's self; or Spinoza's God; […] or the Brunian or the Leibnizian monad*] (p. 741). It is precisely the rejection of the idea of hermetic closure which differentiates the Leibnizian and the Gaddian monad, and which finds its most unequivocal expression in a note added to the 'Obiezioni critiche' [*Critical objections*] in *Meditazione milanese*:

La mia monade e il mio io sono delle baracche sconquassate rispetto alle pure sfere d'acciaio di Leibniz e hanno mille finestre e mille fessure.

[*My monad and my self are shattered barracks compared to Leibniz's pure spheres of steel, and they have a thousand windows and a thousand cracks.*] (p. 832)

The contrast between the idea of the 'permeable' monad with an infinite number of windows and cracks and the antithetically opposed 'windowlessness' of the Leibnizian monadic sphere is further developed in the recently published draft of Gadda's 1929 university dissertation, which confirms the author's continued interest in the philosopher:

> Superordinarsi delle monadi oltre l'io – molteplicità dei significati del fatto percettivo e in genere del fatto storico – ecco due punti d'arrivo già estranei a Leibniz. [...] L'unità [dell'anima umana] esiste, la monade esiste: ma sta a vedere se l'anima è una sola monade o un campo nel quale più monadi si superordinano. Ciò mi premeva di accennare.[11]

> [*The superordination of monads beyond the self – multiplicity of meanings of the perceptual fact and in general of the historical fact – these are two points of arrival which are already foreign to Leibniz. [...] The unity [of the human soul] exists, and the monad exists; but it remains to be seen whether the soul is a single monad or a field in which several monads superordinate themselves. I was keen on emphasizing that*.]

Once more, the emphasis here is on the complex and multifaceted nature of the writer's version of the monad, which contradicts the notion of closure that Leibniz attributed to it. Gadda applies the concept of the monad to his theory of the dissolution of the self, thereby underlining the extent to which his idea of the individual contrasts with that of his rationalist predecessor. Whereas Leibniz's monad represents an impenetrable unity, reflected in the traditionally homogeneous concept of the self, Gadda's monad dissolves through the many windows and holes that symbolize the lack of a cohesive self, which is one of the central thematics of the author's writings and of modernism as such.

As far as Samuel Beckett's appropriation of the concept of the monad is concerned, the Leibnizian term seems to assume the role of furnishing him with a 'splendid little picture' which

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[11] C. E. Gadda, 'La teoria della conoscenza nei "Nuovi saggi"' di G. W. Leibniz', in *I Quaderni dell'Ingegnere*, ed. by Riccardo Stracuzzi (Turin: Einaudi, 2006), p. 20.

is then refashioned or comically distorted, and applied to his poetic purposes. There are two main issues that seem to have captured the writer's interest in the philosopher: while adopting (at least to a certain extent) Leibniz's claim that the monad is 'windowless' and therefore a 'hermetically closed sphere', he rejects the idea of a 'pre-established harmony' of divine origin which purportedly enables the perfect coordination between the world and the individual self/monad. As Garin Dowd argues, Beckett's specific interest in several seventeenth-century thinkers (such as Leibniz, Berkeley and Descartes) shows a 'predominant affection' for the 'impasses and their paradox-laden contours'[12] to which the most important representatives of the Age of Reason took philosophy, rather than in the actual content of their theories. This paradox in Leibniz's work arises in the arguable incompatibility of the monad as a 'hermetically closed sphere' on the one hand, independent of all external interaction, and the apparent interaction with the universe and knowledge of the infinite on the other. Leibniz's system collapses without the function of the divine creator who guarantees the smooth coordination of the world's entities. Beckett's interest in the philosopher's theories, according to Dowd, stems from the realization of this lack of the linking element between the monad and the universe, and the consequent collapse of the teleological system. In fact, the resulting breakdown of causality is creatively explored in several of his writings, and it is the starting point for the solipsism and the lack of purpose suffered by his fictional monads.

In Beckett's works, the monad is at times illustrated by a spatial metaphor, most frequently that of a closed room with a small window (or no window at all), recalling the 'hermetic closure' of Leibnizian origin. By seizing on the limited space of the monad, symbolized by spatial confinement, Beckett underlines the lack of interaction (or solipsism) of the individual with the rest of the world; at the same time, he posits an indefinable 'otherness' in the world outside which does not give his protagonists any comfort or points of reference. The hermetic closure of the system/self, which was so fiercely objected to by the Italian author, is one of the central tenets of Beckett's adoption of the philosophical term.

The monad is a key concept in the central sixth chapter of his early novel *Murphy* (first published in 1938), where the reader is presented with a survey of the protagonist's mind which is clearly suffused with Leibnizian terminology:

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[12] Garin Dowd, 'Nomadology: Reading the Beckettian Baroque' in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 8 (1998), 15-49 (p. 16).

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.[13]

Beckett here adopts and at the same time distorts the original conception of the Leibnizian monad. While embracing the notion of the 'universe' reflected in the microcosm of the monad and its description as a 'closed sphere', he reverses the philosopher's term *plenum* into *vacuum*, which is mirrored in the 'hollow' sphere. According to Leibniz, the monad expresses the entire universe through the relations which form its *plenum* (that is, space without empty place):

As this body [represented by the Monad] expresses the whole universe through the connexion of all matter in the plenum, the soul also represents the whole universe in representing this body, which belongs to it in a special way.[14]

Beckett inverts this claim, and consequently the Leibnizian state of near perfection in the hermetically closed entity of the monad finds itself in *dis*harmony with the universe instead of representing part of it. This distortion is further emphasized in the description of Murphy's garret with its minuscule window, which is put into direct relation with the 'windowlessness' of the monad:

No system of ventilation appeared to dispel the illusion of respirable vacuum. The compartment was windowless, like a monad, except for the shuttered judas in the door [...]. Within the narrow limits of domestic architecture he had never been able to imagine a more creditable representation of what he kept on calling,

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[13] Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p.107. In the French translation of *Murphy*, Beckett explicitly mentions Murphy's interest in Leibniz in this passage. See *Murphy* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1947), p. 119.
[14] Leibniz, p. 253, para. 62.

indefatigably, the little world.[15]

The author here again opposes the 'vacuum' of Murphy's monad-like habitat to Leibniz's harmonious 'plenum'. Moreover, the reference to 'the little world' seems to mock the Leibnizian notion of the 'universe in the monad', which is closely related to the theory of 'pre-established harmony'.

A further 'windowless space' in Beckett's prose is the protagonist's room or 'den' in the 1951 novel *Malone Dies*.[16] The vacuum is here once more associated with the monadic room/womb or skull-like space of the second novel of the *Trilogy*:

> 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. […]. A kind of air circulates, I must have said so, and when all goes still I hear it beating against the walls and being beaten back by them. […] And in the skull is it a vacuum?[17]

The skull-like space in this passage assumes similar features to the monadic enclosures which characterize a large number of Beckett's settings,[18] and once more the 'windowlessness' and the vacuum are linked to the solipsism of the character.

While on the one hand Beckett adopts the conceptual framework of the monad, on the other he denies its inner order as well as its harmonious reflection of the outside world. What the Beckettian monad lacks is both the harmony and the teleological nature which were central to Leibniz's system. The absence of a rational order is further reflected in the lack of synthetic ability of the protagonist of *The Unnamable*, who is confined to a glass jar, strikingly reminiscent of the spatial closure of the monad. As Dowd maintains, the protagonist of the novel fails to cross the threshold of reason, and in this very deficit distinguishes himself from the Leibnizian hierarchical structure of the 'human' monad, who is in full possession of his intellectual

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[15] *Murphy*, p. 181.

[16] See 'Malone Dies' in Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy* (London: Calder, 1994), p. 220.

[17] Ibid., pp. 221-22.

[18] See Naoya Mori, 'Beckett's Windows and the Windowless Self', in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*: *After Beckett/D'après Beckett*, ed. by A. Uhlmann, S. Houppermans and B. Clement (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 357-70, for further examples of 'windowless' spaces in Beckett's works, such as *Endgame* and *Watt*.

capacities.[19] In fact, as Leibniz argues concerning the distinctive features of human beings in the *Monadology*,

> It is the knowledge of necessary and eternal truths that distinguishes us from the mere animals and gives us Reason and the sciences, raising us to the knowledge of ourselves and of God.[20]

The Unnamable, on the contrary, is 'bereft of purpose', with 'no knowledge of anything, no history and no prospects, buried under the seconds, saying any old thing […]'.[21] Deprived of all rational faculties, the protagonist forms a striking counterpoint to the Leibnizian monad, an inadequacy which is further mirrored in his physical crippling, leaving him without even a hand with which to write. The Beckettian vacuum has engulfed the Leibnizian plenum of meaning and purposefulness, reducing the protagonist to a transitional state of identity symbolized by the membrane or 'tympanum' which separates the self from the outside world:

> I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either.[22]

The Beckettian monad has regressed from the Leibnizian self-sufficient, rational entity presided over by a divine creator to a de-centred self which lacks '[any] differential mechanism of reciprocal determination'.[23]

Beckett creatively employs and refashions the concept of the monad to express his critique of the self as a rational unity. He seizes on the paradox into which a godless, Leibnizian universe is thrust and underlines its lack of purpose and rationale. The Beckettian

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[19] See Dowd, pp. 30-34.
[20] Leibniz, p. 233, para. 29. See also para. 30: 'It is also through the knowledge of necessary truths, and through their abstracted expression, that we rise to acts of reflexion, which make us think of what is called I, and observe this or that is within us: and thus, thinking of ourselves, we think of being, of substance, of the simple and the compound, of the immaterial, and of God Himself, conceiving that what is limited in us is in Him without limits. And these acts of reflexion furnish the chief objects of our reasoning.'
[21] 'The Unnamable' in *Trilogy*, p. 388, p. 393.
[22] 'The Unnamable', p. 386.
[23] Dowd, p. 41.

monad/individual is bereft of spatial location and of intellectual capacities, and it vegetates in a state of utter solitude. Gadda on the other hand, who also quite clearly contrasts his own concept of the monad with Leibniz's, vehemently refutes the notion of 'windowlessness', positing an 'impossibile chiusura di un sistema' [*impossible closure of a system*] instead. The most prominent characteristic of his version of the monad/individual is its porosity, which at surface level stands in contrast to the Beckettian adaptation of a 'hermetically closed' sphere of the self, and which underlines the impossibility of a clear definition of the individual's identity.

Despite these divergences in the process of re-interpretation, though, there is a common factor in both Gadda's and Beckett's refashioning of the notion of the monad: the most drastic departure from the Leibnizian theory in both cases occurs with regards to the unitary concept of the self, which undergoes a process of utter disintegration in the two authors' writings. What their appropriations of the philosopher's terminology share is the affirmation of the fragmented self, which on the one hand appears as unstable and subject to a multiplicity of external and internal influences, while on the other features as an inner vacuum shielded from the outer world as a hollow sphere bereft of its rational faculties. The concept of the monad as a reflection of the plenum subsisting in a pre-established harmony with the rest of the universe dissolves in both accounts, either by being deprived of its comprehensive unity or by cutting off all communication with the outer world and losing its inner complexity. The Gaddian thinker is left with the 'baracca sconquassata' [*shattered barrack*] of the self, just as the Beckettian individual is left with a vacuous skull.

What is compelling in the comparative study of the two authors' interpretation of Leibniz's monad is the affinity of their departure from the original meaning. The creative refashioning of the philosophical concept in their works reveals their disillusionment with the traditional idea of the unitary self, which plays an important role in the definition of the Leibnizian individual. Both Gadda's and Beckett's accounts of the monad epitomize the modernist individual's identity crisis: they adopt and reinterpret the Leibnizian concept of the monad as a metaphor for their own theories of the self, which affects both the role of the narrator and of the narrated in their works. The employment of subversive linguistic and narrative techniques which upset the traditional structure of the text and the conventional role of the narrator is a distinctive feature of their writings. The direct contrast with the rationalist predecessor's concept of the monad explored in this paper testifies to the affinity of their

criticisms, which both highlight some of the central characteristics of the modernist critique of the unitary self.