5
The Prosthetic Voice

This chapter considers the voice in Beckett’s work in terms of the concept of prosthesis. In Beckett’s case, the inner eye discussed in the previous chapter is inseparable from the inner ear, as suggested in *Texts for Nothing*: ‘the eye staring behind the lids, the ears straining for a voice not from without’ (*CSP* 85). But whereas the correlation between the technological and the physical is significant in Beckett’s prosthetic vision, it does not seem to be so in his engagement with sound technologies. In other words, a notion such as the physiological ear or the ‘ear of flesh’ does not appear to be important. This is because the ear as an organ is not highlighted as often as the eye. Instead of the ear itself, the voice is the chief component in Beckett’s concern with the auditory sense.

Chapter 2 showed how in Beckett’s work the bodily organs are like detachable prostheses and as such can be confused with each other. In this economy, where the boundaries of the body are constantly problematised, the orifices and the bodily flows running through them are highlighted as important sites of interaction between the inside and the outside. The voice is one of those flows and can be equated with tears or excrement. It is also figured as an enveloping veil (Didier Anzieu’s concept of the ‘sound envelope’) that should be torn apart in order to reach silence. In either case, it is possible to regard the voice as a kind of prosthesis in that it is both inside and outside the body, something that belongs to but is alien to the body.

In this chapter, however, I intend to link the Beckettian voice to prosthesis in a different way. In order to consider the prosthetic sense in terms of the auditory sense, I will focus on what I call the ‘prosthetic voice’. This is the voice that is mediated by machines or technology – the voice coming from the tape recorder, telephone or radio, for example. Just as in the case of visual technologies, the sound...
technologies invented and developed from the late nineteenth century onwards profoundly transformed sensory perceptions, and their impact is variously inscribed in the art and literature of modernism including Beckett’s work. But what is unique in his case? The focus in this chapter will be primarily on the relation between the prosthetic voice and the inner voice (heard in the skull). This will necessarily entail an examination of the relation between the voice ‘not from without’ and that ‘from without’.¹

In his essay ‘Echo’s Bones: Myth, Modernity and the Vocalic Uncanny’, Steven Connor argues that while inheriting the Romantic idea of the voice, modernism replaced it with what he calls a sense of the ‘vocalic uncanny’. He argues that ‘the modernist desire for origin and presence is vexed and pestered by the suspicion of belatedness and absence’ (215). In other words, the values historically associated with the voice, such as ‘presence; life; redemption; truth; and the human subject’, are diminished as ‘the vocalic uncanny focuses upon the moments of separation, spacing, and distance within the excursive exercise of the voice’ (234, 215). This shift was closely related to the invention of various acoustic technologies. The phonograph, for example, brought death into the voice by separating it from its origin and letting the dead speak (227). Connor suggests that Beckett exemplifies this link between the ‘vocalic uncanny’ and sound technology, which was already evident in the works of such modernists as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. We are easily reminded of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, in which the use of a tape recorder successfully stages an uncanny resurrection of the young Krapp in the presence of the old Krapp.

However, even when sound technologies are not actually used or mentioned, the voice in Beckett’s work has a curious affinity with the mechanically mediated voice – the prosthetic voice. The voice in *The Unnamable*, for example, has a structure that can be fruitfully likened to the voice of the telephone or gramophone, though it seems to be the inner voice in the skull. The actual use of a tape recorder in *Krapp’s Last Tape* can be seen as continuous with this fundamentally prosthetic nature of the Beckettian voice. I am going to discuss this prosthetic voice with reference to Derrida’s ideas on telecommunication and tele-technology, which are remarkably relevant but hitherto little explored in Beckett criticism. In the same context, I will also consider the theme of the ghost, which was touched upon in the previous chapter in respect of visual technology. The final section will highlight an aspect of Beckett’s voice that eludes the Derridean approach. Mainly with regard to his radio dramas, it will be emphasised that Beckett had to resort to