

# The Aesthetics of Failure



The Aesthetics of Failure:  
Inexpressibility in Samuel Beckett's Fiction

By

Marcin Tereszewski

**CAMBRIDGE  
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P U B L I S H I N G

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# INTRODUCTION

## BECKETT AND THEORY

What is different about Beckett is not that he provokes a critical response... but the protean, open-ended, 'undecidable quality of the challenge he offers. In this, it seems to us, he is the poet of the post-structuralist age. Not that he was not the poet of other ages too for he was – Beckett as the quintessential *nouveau romancier*, Beckett the Cartesian, Beckett the Existentialist, these have rubbed shoulders with Beckett the nihilist, Beckett the mystic and Beckett the explorer of the limitations of language. (Butler and Davis 1988: ix)

The futility of classifying Beckett into any philosophical or literary category is now a commonplace sentiment shared by many Beckett scholars and is one which explains the multiplicity and variety of critical approaches undertaken throughout the years. Notwithstanding the variety of philosophical contexts in which Beckett has been read, the question which has most visibly stood out is whether Beckett is to be classified as a modernist or as a postmodernist writer. Beckett criticism indeed stands at a theoretical crossroads, as it seems that Beckett has served critics as both a paradigmatic modernist and a paradigmatic postmodernist, the poet of existential humanism and also the deconstructionist *par excellence*. The question of where to locate Beckett within these paradigms has been one of the most enduring fixtures in Beckett scholarship with no valid consensus being even possible due to the divergent understanding of the terms in question. This debate between a modernist Beckett and a postmodernist Beckett, according to David Pattie, “should be thought of as a divide between those who used literary texts to uncover the essential truth of human experience, and those who used texts to uncover the contingent nature of reality” (227) and he concludes that “there is ample evidence in Beckett’s work to support both cases” (227). The former approach would adhere to the essentialist bias of existentialist humanism, whereas the latter would be more in line with the linguistic focus of poststructuralist theories.

This first approach is connected to the first period of Beckett criticism inaugurated in the 1960s with the publication of Martin Esslin’s *Theatre of*

*the Absurd* (1961) and Hugh Kenner's *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (1961). Both of these books established Beckett studies within the paradigm of existentialist humanism, wherein Beckett's work was read primarily in terms of a search for a foundation of human experience confronted in its naked authenticity. For these critics, Beckett is a modernist not only because of the themes they locate in his work but also because of the experimental nature of his work, especially in regards to language and style. This experimentalism breaks with the conventions of the traditional novel and proceeds to question the 'essential' subjectivity underlying language and the narrative. The idea of a reliable narrator or I speaker is thus thrown into question, thereby breaking with the convention of a stable voice constituting the center of a narrative. Along with the destabilization of authorial voice, language becomes the subject of inquiry. This break in both narrative and theatrical conventions places language and style at the forefront of the debate.

The dissolution into incomprehensibility and paratactic language seems to have been one of the salient features which defined Beckett as modernist writer, first associated with the French *nouvelle roman*. As Alain Robbe-Grillet explains:

Things must take place within the text itself. It is impossible to write a text which, as a narration, is based on the old established order when its purpose is to show that this order is wavering. On the contrary. Everything must happen within the text so that severances, faults, ambiguities, mobilities, fragmentation, contractions, holes must be enacted. It is the text which must display them. (24)

The text then becomes not a vehicle for any coherent meaning or story as such, but the object of interrogation. The emphasis on style, itself a defining feature of a modernist writer, relegates the "story" to a secondary position of importance, as style is no longer seen as an innocent medium of the story, but is itself implicated in its construction.

The second period of Beckett criticism, beginning in the 1970 until today, developed as a result of literary studies becoming more theoretical, interdisciplinary, extending their scope to philosophy, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism and feminism,<sup>1</sup> to name just a few of the disciplines

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<sup>1</sup> All these various theoretical approaches are outlined and examined in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett's Studies* and *Samuel Beckett in Longman Critical Readers*. Philosophy deserves special attention, because it seems to be the most developed theoretical context in Beckett studies, evidenced by such publications as

employed for the purposes of studying literature. With the development of poststructuralism in literary studies and postmodernism as a general cultural and literary paradigm shift, critics began to extrapolate postmodern tendencies in the themes and theoretical tenets underlying Beckett's work, especially his prose. They employed theories and terminology connected with poststructuralism, thus setting themselves apart from Esslin's humanist existentialism by pursuing an interest in linguistic indeterminacy, destabilization of subjectivity and meaning.<sup>2</sup> Some of the major deconstructive readings of Beckett – Connor (1988), Hill (1990), Tresize (1990) – do not attempt to deconstruct Beckett, but rather read him as a self-deconstructive author, demonstrating that his own poetics is already parasitically working on/against itself. This closeness between deconstruction and Beckett's own language is the affirmed reason why Derrida himself had never attempted an analysis of Beckett's work.

Whereas the humanist existentialist reads Beckett's work in terms of a search for the authentic subject and a confrontation with existence, the poststructuralist would undermine the very conditions in which a subject and reality could be represented in the first place. Despite the vast differences between these two approaches, it would seem that both critical theories express a skeptical attitude towards language: the former seeing it as an artificial impediment cloaking the essential and ultimately inexpressible truth of the human condition, the latter seeing language more in terms of its inherent presuppositions and narratological determinations which coincide with a logocentric bias always already at work in writing. The proponents of both approaches to Beckett would therefore agree that he was writing *against* language, aware of all the contingencies and pitfalls traditional narratives hold for a writer. Beckett's writing thus exposes to full view the mechanisms and presuppositions defining literature.

Another important focal point identified by critics of the poststructuralist persuasion addresses the question of foundationalism. Whereas modernists and humanist existentialists would rather see the breakdown of language and narrative as serving the overall pursuit of an essential foundation of truth and the human condition, the poststructuralist sees it more as a destabilization of the possibilities of representation, a complete break with the idea of a transcendental signified which would exist outside the

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*Beckett and Philosophy*, which outlines the various philosophical influences on Beckett.

<sup>2</sup> This poststructuralist tendency in Beckett criticism is further exemplified by publications devoted primarily to this topic. Eric Migernier's *Beckett and French Theory: The Narration of Transgression* and Anthony Uhlmann's *Beckett and Poststructuralism*.

materiality of an endlessly deferring language. It would seem that Beckett's work offers ample evidence in support of both readings; however, the poststructuralist interpretation would read Beckett as putting into question the whole concept of the essential truth, self and reality, seeing them as linguistic constructs adhering to a logocentric constitution. Beckett's work can thus be read as an evolution from modernist intimations of 'depth' existing beneath the materiality of language.

Consequently, Samuel Beckett occupies an ambiguous place in the history of literature. To label Beckett a modernist, postmodernist, avant-gardist, or any other "-ist" would be a gross simplification of the philosophically ambivalent nature of his work. Whether or not Beckett can be considered a modernist or a postmodernist is therefore beside the point, as his work extends to a remarkably wide field of philosophical thought. Neither modernist, nor postmodernist, Beckett's work is an example of the kind of writing that resists a totalizing interpretation. Accordingly, the main difficulty faced by anyone attempting a critical account of Beckett's work is the inadequacy of any theoretical boundaries within which an interpretation could be proposed. Because Beckett's texts do not yield themselves readily to interpretations, all interpretations ventured on behalf of any philosophical methodology seem in the end to be impositions on his work. In this sense, Beckett's texts resemble what Barthes calls "writerly" texts, texts which draw attention to themselves as textual constructs and require the active participation of the reader. For decades now Beckett's work has afforded inspiration to adherents of various philosophical trends. Indeed, it would seem as though the whole history of philosophy can be read (or rather written) into Beckett's texts.

One important critic who establishes a theoretical link between the modernist and postmodernist model of Beckett criticism is Ihab Hassan. Not only is he one of the first critics of postmodernism, Hassan also contributed to Beckett criticism with his book, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (1967). What separates this study from the prevailing existentialist interpretations is the shift Hassan makes from describing a meaningless and absurd world towards establishing language itself as being meaningless and silence thus being the only possible outcome and goal of a writer like Beckett who "may be considered the author who wants to seal the lips of the muse" (31). In his focus on silence, Hassan introduces one of the defining themes of postmodernism: a distrust of language as a means of conveying meaning. Of the eleven "defiens" of postmodernity that Hassan famously lists in "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective", one – The Unrepresentable – stands out as crucial for this study. He develops this term, stating that "Postmodern

literature, particularly, often seeks its limits, entertains its 'exhaustion', subverts itself in forms of articulate 'silence'. It becomes liminary, contesting the modes of its own representation" (197) and later goes on to quote J-F Lyotard: "the postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself" (197).

The aesthetic dimension of inexpressibility and its ethical consequences will be the primary focus of this study. Inexpressibility, as evidenced in the essays collected in *Ineffability*, is not merely a modernist or a postmodernist concern, but is a topic that has spanned literature from religious discourse to Beckett. The Judeo-Christian interdiction against naming/representing God becomes the basis for the poststructuralist impossibility of representing the center of any given structure, be it religious, political, ideological or philosophical. And thus God is impossible to represent within the confines of the system of which he is the center as much as the subject who replaced God as the center of what had become the center of a humanist (instead of theological) model of reality. As Derrida points out in his famous "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" the center is what is at once in and outside the structure it defines.

The failure to express and represent in Beckett's work is the guiding theme of this book. The trope of ineffability, inexpressibility, unrepresentability is not new to literature, and is certainly not the creation of the postmodern, as Hassan's criterion might have suggested; inexpressibility, as a trope and topic, has been present in Western literature, philosophy and religion since ancient times. Inexpressibility spans the modernism/postmodernism debate and it could be argued that it is one of the central questions of both approaches, which is why it also holds a central place in this dissertation.

Philosophy has always been a veritable force in Beckett criticism. As Simon Critchley notes, "Beckett's work seems to offer itself generously to philosophical interpretation only to withdraw this offer by periodically reducing such interpretation to ridicule" (143). Indeed, Beckett's work is a reservoir of philosophical allusions and traditions which have given birth to a staggering array of comparative studies. Starting with a broad existentialist framework, Beckett criticism later moved to identifying concrete philosophical influences on Beckett in the works of René Descartes, Arthur Schopenhauer, Arnold Geulincx, Fritz Mauthner, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to name but a few. This study is no different in this respect, as it also takes philosophy as its context for reading Beckett and to this end brings Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas as a context. The notion of ethics developed by Levinas has been a major

philosophical influence in the approach represented in this dissertation, especially in the third chapter, which deals almost exclusively with the notion of alterity. Blanchot's philosophy of literature, seeing writing as negation, the writer as the neutral voice of exteriority, has provided this dissertation with an illuminating, though by no means exhaustive, framework. Though critics have commented on the affinity between Beckett and Blanchot (most notably Simon Critchley and Leslie Hill), there is, however, no one critical body of work which would develop the philosophical themes permeating the work of these two writers.

Not much is known about Blanchot's life. Before the outbreak of World War II, Blanchot was a Parisian journalist who contributed essays on literary and political matters to various journals. Blanchot's writing can be divided into four types: political journalism, literary reviews, novels and a hybrid style of writing which escapes classification, often referred to as *recits* written in an enigmatic and aphoristic style. It is quite difficult to reconstruct the philosophical context of Blanchot's literary theories, as they were developed mostly through his many reviews commissioned by French journals such as the *Journal des Debats*, *Critique* and *La Nouvelle Revue Francaise*. These reviews did not adhere to rigid academic standards in the sense that neither footnotes nor a works cited page was employed. Furthermore, Blanchot rarely makes any references to his contemporaries, even when he is directly commenting on their theories.

Nevertheless, it is possible to establish key ideas and philosophical tenets which guide the reading of Blanchot's work. What is at the heart of Blanchot theory "is the link between language and negativity, where negativity describes the power of language to negate the reality of things through the insubstantiality of the word" (Hasse and Large 25). It can be seen that Blanchot's work often questions the possibilities of literature itself. This study will attempt to contextualize Beckett's work within Blanchot's theories of literature, emphasizing the way in which Beckett's texts are in many ways a demonstration of Blanchot's tenets. Though there was no personal relationship between Beckett and Blanchot, there certainly was an artistic kinship. By the time Beckett was working on his trilogy, Blanchot was already established in the literary community as an influential critic. His favourable review of *The Unnamable* was, in the words of Beckett's biographer Anthony Cronin, "a milestone in the progress of Beckett's reputation" (436).

The first chapter explores the place negativity holds in Beckett's prose, especially *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, in terms of its linguistic (aesthetic) expression and philosophical backdrop. Beckett's own texts dealing with literary theory, serve as a starting point for the discussion of

the place language has in his own work. Such pieces as “The German Letter of 1937” and his essay, “Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce”, though never directly about his own work, nonetheless provide insight into his poetics, which will be presented as a poetics of negativity and failure. It must be made clear that this negativity is far removed from the nihilism so often ascribed to Beckett’s work. This negativity will be read more as a denial of the constraining force of language and is in line with the dominant modernist paradigm of negativity being an escape from the materiality of language towards a metaphysical essence found beyond representation. Beckett’s trilogy provides a remarkable example of a work, in which both subjectivity and language become the subjects of negative subtraction. The final volume of the trilogy, *The Unnamable*, presents the self as language with only a voice questioning its own existence. The means of representing the self are put in question with the only outcome being an infinite regress of paradoxical language and aporetic self-contradiction. Beckett’s subsequent prose work, *Texts for Nothing*, further develops this experiment in linguistic implosion and draws even more attention to the negative capacity of literature.

Blanchot’s theory of literature will offer a framework in which to read Beckett’s fiction, as an affinity can be discerned between the negative direction Blanchot was to take with the proposal of neutral speech as the anonymous and disembodied voice of literature and Beckett’s negative poetics. Language will be the main focus of this chapter which will trace the philosophical impetus generated by Stéphane Mallarmé and Blanchot regarding the place of negation in relation to literature.

The second chapter focuses on the visual aspects of Beckett’s work, seeing in them a reworking of the inexpressibility *topos*. It can be observed that Beckett at a certain point in his career moved from writing prose towards a more visual medium; first, there was the theatre, then there was work indented for television (*Film*). Furthermore, even in his earlier narrative work, Beckett was extremely meticulous about visual details to the extent that certain fragments can be read as linguistic snapshots of events, so visually stimulating are the details. For example, certain scenes in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *Company*, and *Imagination Dead Imagine* are comprised of descriptions of an image.

Beckett’s biographers (James Knowlson and Anthony Cronin) have also portrayed Beckett as a lover and a patron of the arts, frequently visiting art galleries, befriending and supporting local artists, both famous and amateur. There is a vivid connection to be discerned between the arts and Beckett’s work, an influence that has not gone unnoticed by Beckett critics, especially Lois Oppenheim whose book-length study, *The Painted*

*Veil*, is devoted to the subject. In this book, Oppenheim sought not only to extrapolate the influence the visual arts had exerted on Beckett's creativity but also to offer a theoretical link between the visual arts and Beckett's particular sensitivity to the visual medium. Notwithstanding the various connections particular works of art have to particular scenes in Beckett's work or to the theatrical imagery employed on stage, there is also a philosophical affinity linking Beckett's conception of art with that of surrealism and expressionism, as evidenced in his own comments on famous painters and the arts found in *Disjecta*.

What this chapter seeks to portray is not so much the relationship between the arts and Beckett's writing, but how inexpressibility remains one of the most dominant themes in the visual dimension of such pieces as *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Imagination Dead Imagination*. The way absence and invisibility, ill-seeing, is employed coincides with the general discussion of inexpressibility in the previous chapter in that both have at their source a concern for the preservation of alterity; both approaches, the linguistic and the visual, are predicated on the presupposition that the failure to represent is a necessary failure, one which is responsible for the ethical relation with the inexpressible Other.

The third chapter serves as a synthesis of the two previous chapters in the sense that it binds the notions of inexpressibility and negativity in both the linguistic and visual medium with the notion of ethics as it is understood by both Blanchot and, especially, Emmanuel Levinas. The questions raised in this chapter will concern the relation inexpressibility and language has to alterity and what figures as the Other in literature. This question of remaining silent in relation to alterity has already been approached within the context of negative theology whose links with Derrida's deconstruction will be briefly explored for the purpose of fleshing out the affinity between deconstruction and Beckett's art.

This chapter will take Beckett's *How It Is* as its focal point and will explore it in terms of ethics, especially in respect to how the notion of the witness is utilized in relation to alterity. It will be necessary to draw on Levinas's philosophy, as the relation a subject has towards this unnamable Other is for Levinas the basis of ethics. It has been noticed by such critics as Ewa Plonowska-Ziarek and Alain Badiou that Beckett's work, starting with *How It Is*, shifts its attention from the solipsistic questioning of itself as a narrative towards a confrontation with alterity. This chapter goes some way in locating Beckett within the postmodern paradigm in so far as the postmodern is understood as a current of thought that maintains an irreducible distance to alterity.



The choice of these particular novels and *recits* by Beckett was dictated primarily by the salience of the themes under discussion. Though theatrical and television works are referred to on occasion, the intention of this study was to focus on Beckett's prose works, as they have received relatively little attention from critics. Compared to the critical attention *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* have received, works such as *Texts for Nothing*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* have been mostly ignored. Two works in particular – *The Unnamable* and *How It Is* – stand out as they represent a culmination, or turning point, in Beckett's poetics and thus merit particular attention. The topic discussed in this dissertation is deeply entrenched in the philosophy of Levinas and Blanchot and thus much of the content is devoted to an extrapolation of the philosophical context within which Beckett's work can be discussed.

My readings of the selected texts by Beckett locate inexpressibility in the junction between the ethical and the aesthetic significance of a relation to alterity. This study will attempt to show that inexpressibility in Beckett's texts is not only a modernist aesthetic criterion, whereby language is put to the limit, but also an ethical necessity imposed by the relation maintained with alterity. The aesthetics of failure is bound with an ethical obligation imposed by the impossible demand to write the inexpressible.



# CHAPTER ONE

## TOWARDS NEGATIVITY

The theme of nothingness in Beckett's work has gained critical currency mostly as an example of the moribund nihilism pervasive in existentialist readings, though the scope of this theme extends further beyond existentialism to include both ancient as well as modern philosophy.<sup>1</sup> The two primary questions I will attempt to answer in this chapter are: how does Beckett attempt to present nothingness and what is the philosophical context of this endeavor? To answer the first question, I will present the negative imperative as it exists in Beckett's critical writing, the importance of which has become increasingly visible in Beckett criticism due to the publication of *Disjecta*, a collection of miscellaneous writings, letters and essays, which give much insight into the theoretical background of Beckett's work. Furthermore, I will present the various textual strategies employed by Beckett as a way of destabilizing, or perhaps "detextualizing" the work. This will lead us to the second question of the philosophical conditions of such writing, as well as to the significant place of nothingness in *Texts for Nothing*, which will be approached within the context of Beckett's contemporary and critic, Maurice Blanchot. Both these questions will be discussed within the framework of the inexpressibility *topos* binding Beckett's work.

In "The German Letter of 1937",<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett states that language is "like a veil that must be torn in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it" (Beckett 1984: 171). This statement seems to reveal a pivotal declaration; namely, that the direction of Beckett's artistic program is informed by an essentialist bias which locates authentic reality as existing behind the obfuscating appearances of language. Moreover, this authentic reality, as this statement declares, might also be construed as

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<sup>1</sup> Ackerley traces this theme of Nothingness, stressing the references Beckett has made to Democritus, Geulincx and Schopenhauer (409-410).

<sup>2</sup> This letter, written in German (translated by Martin Esslin) on July 9, 1937 to Axel Kaun who he had met in Germany three months prior to writing the letter. This letter in German and its translation (51-54; 170-73) was included in *Disjecta*.

Nothingness. Therefore, in order to reveal this “Nothingness” behind the words, Beckett had to first compose the necessary textual fabric which would then be meticulously dismantled, thereby exposing the metaphysical presuppositions and grammatical entanglements which rendered the project an impossibility *ab initio*. Indeed, much of Beckett’s work, from *The Unnamable* onwards, resembles a textual structure encasing nothingness, mathematically engineered patterns leading to an exhaustion of the very figures and signs constructing the structure.<sup>3</sup> This is evinced in Beckett’s predilection for the use of exhaustive permutations and aporetic logic. It has now become commonplace to view language in Beckett’s fiction as an obstacle on the path to silence and ideal apperception.<sup>4</sup> This approach owes much to the intentional fallacy of accommodating Beckett’s own comments on language and his artistic obligation “to bore one hole after another in it [language], until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today” (Beckett 1984: 172). The metaphysical notion of exposing the something or nothing behind the artificial nature of language is what strongly links Beckett to the modernist notion of inexpressibility. Language, or rather the distance that Beckett hoped to achieve from language, guides the aesthetics of his work, which is an aesthetics of inexpressibility.

## **The Philosophical Origins of Nothingness in Beckett**

Beckett’s imperative to express the nothingness preempting the materiality of words is (despite the professed impossibility of fruition) the driving force behind much of his work. Yet, little consideration has been given to the tradition from which the concept of nothingness in Beckett’s work originates. It would be impossible within the limits of this study to provide a survey of the vast philosophical tradition permeating Beckett’s work, for one would have to start with pre-Socratic philosophy and work one’s way up to Derrida; however, the theme of nothingness – already present, as we have seen, in Beckett’s critical work – can be distilled to a

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<sup>3</sup> A mathematical awareness informs Beckett’s writings. Permutations, serial themes and logical exhaustion can be found in *Watt*. Geometry and accurate spatial coordinates construct the images in *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Logic and mathematics are frequently utilized for either comic purposes or to prove their ineffectiveness as epistemological tools. Paradox and exhaustion are the results of logic and mathematics, not conclusions.

<sup>4</sup> This approach is visible in critical studies which are based on existentialism (cf. Esslin 46) and on negative theology (Wolosky 90-92).

distinct philosophical pedigree alluded already to in a letter to Sighne Kennedy in which Beckett stated that “if I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work my points of departure would be the ‘Naught is more real . . .’ and the ‘Ubi nihil vales . . .’” (*Disjecta* 113). Both these quotes refer to the works of two philosophers, Democritus and Arnold Geulincx respectively.<sup>5</sup> Though Beckett was responding here to a letter concerning *Murphy*, I believe that these points of departure are also relevant for a study of Beckett’s later work.

Beckett directly draws from Democritus when he has Malone say, “nothing is more real than nothingness” (1973: 193). Nothingness in Democritus’ atomism bears a relevant relation to Beckett’s conception of the void. Democritus was the first to argue for the constitutive force the void has over atoms, which, in other words, translates to the constitutive role of non-being in relation to being. Empty space became a necessary element in the constitution of atoms and “was postulated as required for motion, but was characterized as ‘what is not’, thus violating the Eleatic principle that what is not cannot be” (Taylor 204). For Democritus the void was understood as a necessary place for atoms to exist and be in motion, and thus the void, no longer conceptualized as nothingness, began to function as space; that is, as a constitutive condition for being to exist. “Naught is more real than nothing”, because without the void as space there would be no atoms, no tangible being. As will be seen later, the void as a positive constitutive force is also present in the literary theories of Beckett and Blanchot.

The second quoted dictum: *Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis* (“Where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing”) is ascribed to the Flemish Cartesian Occasionalist, Arnould Geulincx, whose works Beckett read in their original Latin. The influence of Geulincx’s philosophy is both covertly (*Murphy*, *The Unnamable*) and overtly present (*Molloy*) in Beckett’s novels leading up to *Texts for Nothing*. For Geulincx, the mind, unlike the body, was outside God’s sphere of influence. Much of the mind/body dualism present in Beckett’s work owes to Geulincx’s philosophy. Occasionalists, notably Melanbranche, developed their theory of divine causation on the basis of the Cartesian mind/body dualism. The physical world and the mental world are thus completely separated in terms of mutual influence and God is seen as the supreme intervening force of events. In his *Ethics* (1675), Geulincx praises the meditative efforts exerted within the microcosm of the mind, as only within the

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold Geulincx’s *Ethics* has only recently been translated into English from its original Latin read by Beckett.

confines of the mind does the human will enjoy unbridled freedom. The Beckettian obligation to express can be traced to Geulincx's ethical imperative of renouncing materialism in favor of introspection. Along with materialism language too had to be overcome, and it is at this point that Beckett's work comes closest to the practices of negative theology.

Though Beckett never refers directly to any other philosophers as he had done to Democritus and Geulincx, the problem of nothingness in modern philosophy and in Beckett has been addressed through the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Hegel, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. As Lance St. John Butler's arduously researched book, *Samuel Beckett and the Meaning of Being: A Study in Ontological Parable*, demonstrates, the philosophical tenets of the three aforementioned philosophers can be successfully extrapolated from Beckett's work. However, the most important aspect of Beckett's invocation to nothingness is the degree to which it differs from nihilism understood as a voiding of meaning and value. It is precisely this hypostatic nothingness in Beckett's work that makes meaning possible and constitutes the primary imperative underlying his fiction.

### **The negative imperative in Beckett's critical writing**

Beckett's critical writing emerges from the initial phase of his career and, though never explicitly about his own literary work, it nonetheless offers insight into his artistic endeavors, providing as it does a gloss and framework of the themes found in his subsequent work. I am not suggesting here that his rather scant critical output should be treated as a key to a systematic philosophy or aesthetic theory which could be directly applied to Beckett's drama and fiction, yet it is impossible to ignore the multiple clues in the form of philosophical allusions, aesthetic concerns, and artistic assumptions found in the essays, letters and dialogues accumulated in *Disjecta*. Considering Beckett's reticence about his work, the publication of such critical texts offers the reader what must be treated as a tentative, though helpful, intellectual backdrop to his work. The two seminal critical texts to be considered here – "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce" (1929) and "Three Dialogues with George Duthuit" (1949) – have been chosen on account of their preoccupation with the themes in question: negativity and inexpressibility. Before continuing to those essays, it would be beneficial to outline the literary origins of this preoccupation.

A brief comparison of Beckett's work with that of Joyce's will suffice to shed some light on the formation of Beckett's poetics, particularly his

preoccupation with negation. Indeed, the influence that Joyce had on his protégée has already been the subject of numerous studies,<sup>6</sup> which is why only one aspect of the Joyce/Beckett relationship will be of interest here; namely, the understanding that each of the writers had of language. Though Beckett's poetics was greatly indebted to and influenced by the few years in the late 20s he spent helping Joyce<sup>7</sup> write *Finnegan's Wake*, it becomes clear that a radical separation did occur. This struggle with the Joycean legacy is evidenced in an interview assembled by Israel Shenker and quoted by Gontarski:

. . . the difference is that Joyce was a superb manipulator of material, perhaps the greatest. He was making words do the absolute maximum of work. There isn't a syllable that's superfluous. The kind of work I do is one in which I am not the master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. His tendency is toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think that impotence has been exploited in the past. (1985: 232)

The rejection of knowledge and power for the sake of impotence opens for Beckett a type of writing that depends on negativity for its 'structure.' I use the term structure loosely, as Beckett's disintegrating texts and grammar offer testimony to his anti-systematic and anti-structural conception of writing, yet within this disintegration, the negative imperative does offer a principle on which composition is based.

"Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce", a tribute and interpretation of Joyce's "Work in Progress" (*Finnegan's Wake*), is a crucial starting point to a reading of Beckett's work. Here, Beckett addresses the melding of form and content in the *Work in Progress*, an aim that is arguably fulfilled in *Finnegan's Wake* and one that finds its continuation in Beckett's work. About *Work in Progress*, Beckett writes: "Here form is content, content is form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His [Joyce's] writing is not about something; it is that something itself" (Beckett 1984: 27). Indeed, musicality and an onomatopoeic rendering of content were to remain a constant element in Beckett's work; however, in

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<sup>6</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> edition of *European Joyce Studies, Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative* is a collection of essays exploring the issue of the Beckett/Joyce relation. Dirk van Hulle's essay entitled "'Nichtsnichtsundnichts': Beckett's and Joyce's Transtextual Undoinings" deserves special attention due to its emphasis on this relation.

<sup>7</sup> Knowlson remarks that Joyce's influence on Beckett was primarily a moral one, making Beckett realize that indeed writing, not teaching, was his calling (111).

other aspects, such as the aesthetic deployment of negativity, Beckett distanced himself from his mentor's poetics.

Linda Ben-Zvi draws attention to the influence of Fritz Mauthner's linguistic skepticism and nominalism exerted on Beckett's poetics, identifying him alongside Descartes and Schopenhauer as key figures in Beckett's thinking (1985: 194). Mauthner's emphasis on the metaphorical nature of language and its inability to represent anything beyond itself may have led Beckett to refute Joyce's "apotheosis of the word" (Beckett 1984: 172). For Joyce language was capable of encapsulating history and could be utilized to compile an encyclopedic repertoire of phenomenal experience. Joyce strove for a realistic and teleological depiction of consciousness afforded by the "immediacy" of the stream of consciousness technique, a technique already laden with the lyricism and verbosity Beckett sought to avoid. Instead, Beckett opted for an ascetic approach – not a mastery of language, but its rejection and reduction. Commenting on the aesthetic ambivalence present in the Joyce/Beckett relationship, Gontarski writes: "Although Beckett spent considerable energy imitating and defending Joyce, his own aesthetics was shaped mostly in recoil" (1985: 232). Yet this recoil into negativity is nonetheless a form of potency, as the progression towards inexpressibility and nothingness propels the text, if not forward, then simply "on".

"The Three Dialogues with George Duthuit," most likely fashioned upon Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, are famous for containing one of the most famous of Beckett's *dicta* regarding the primary aesthetic dilemma of art which, "weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little bit further along a dreary road" (1984: 139) should instead opt for "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (1984: 139). This oft-quoted passage, made in reference to Bram van Velde's paintings, has gained critical notoriety, not only because it rather exhaustively expounds Beckett's "aesthetic of nothingness" (Murphy 1991: 49), but also because it combines both ethical concerns connected with the obligation to express and with the purely aesthetic notion of inexpressibility. Both the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions of art meld here as they do in his later work. This passage is, therefore, evocative of the impotence that a writer deals with when expressing what is not merely a product of language. Though negativity seems to be the axiomatic trajectory of Beckett's work, Gontarski reads the "nothing to express" as an active phrase: "what remains to be expressed is nothingness, even



though that needs to be done with the faulty system of language” (1985: 236).

Furthermore, this “sweeping distinction” is reiterated during the conversation on Bram van Velde, where the topic falls on the condition of the artist: “the situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since he is obliged to paint. The act is of him, who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event paints, since he is obliged to paint” (142). Beckett’s work is replete with protagonists who are thrust into an involuntary relation with alterity which demands a response, whether it be waiting as is required by Godot, writing as is required by the mysterious Godot-like Youdi in *Malone Dies*, speaking as is required by the “they” in *The Unnamable*, and remembering as is required by Krapp’s recorded voice from the past in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, to name just a few examples. It becomes clear that the actions of the protagonists, however inconsequential and circular they may be, are precipitated by the demand set forth by this inexpressible and invisible source. It must be added that this is a common Modernist “aporia”, referred to also by Blanchot in “From Dread to Language”: “The writer finds himself in this more and more comical situation – of having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it.... Whatever he wants to say, it is nothing” (345).

Based on a real conversation between Beckett and George Duthuit, “The Three Dialogues” express what could be read as an artistic manifesto, with a clear declaration of the negative mode his fiction and drama were to assume in the future. Furthermore, “The Three Dialogues” themselves are a dramatic dialogue structured in a way that reflects the negative imperative it advocates. This rhetoric of self-negation and false logic will become familiar in the trilogy. David A. Hatch, in his study on “The Three Dialogues”, develops the assertion that the two speakers, B and D, construct an argument with undefined assertions, (such as void), instead of demolishing a proposed argument in the Platonic fashion by *questioning the assertions* (454). The feebleness of this construction is exposed by B with his last lines, “Yes, yes I am mistaken, I am mistaken” (Beckett 1984: 45). The character B often contradicts his assertions, occupying the role of the fool, consigning B to failure.

Beckett’s critical essays can be used to make the case that his preoccupation with inexpressibility of nothingness evolved in opposition to Joyce’s poetics and in response to Fritz Mauthner’s skeptical view of language that draws attention to its own paucity as a means of expression. Beckett noted that some form of Nominalist irony is necessary to his project of the “unword” (Beckett 1984: 173). The sense of having to

continue writing, despite the impossibility of doing so, is a theme that permeates much of his later work, starting with the trilogy and onwards. Moreover, the methods for how this “going on” would be carried out is prefigured in these critical statements which give a clear indication of the negative direction his work was to take.

### Negativity in *The Unnamable*

The trilogy as a whole could be seen as representing a culmination in Beckett's fiction, where many of the themes of his earlier work are brought to fruition and where most of what was to follow draws much on the themes found therein. In one of the few recorded interviews (with Isreal Shenker) Beckett said “in my last book – *The Unnamable* – there's complete disintegration. No ‘I’, no ‘have’, no being’. No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on.”<sup>8</sup> In essence, *The Unnamable* is a language experiment based on pure reason, wherein self-referential language is employed for the purpose of a subject establishing himself. In the course of this experience, the basic oppositions of subject/object, origin and representation, and same and other, are disintegrated, leading towards, though never reaching, the inexpressible source of literature. Every name is later negated and any stable linguistic referent is discarded, thereby creating a subjectless subject as the first-person narrative. The themes can be further distilled, as Beckett's narrator tells us that “in my life, since we must call it so, there were three things, the inability to speak, the inability to be silent, and solitude, that what I've had to make the best of” (400).

Much of what could be seen as the premise of *The Unnamable* can be construed as an amalgamation of various philosophical notions pertaining to subjectivity. The reference to Descartes' method of self-apperception is unmistakable, as is the reference to Locke's *tabula rasa*. If subjectivity is conceived as a result of the ability to think self-reflexively, thus recognizing oneself as a sentient being by means of sensory experience and language, then *The Unnamable* is the proper thought experiment in attempting to conceive of such a consciousness. Severed from an outside phenomenal existence, the unnamable speaking “I” can refer only to itself for validity. This self-reflexive reference to “oneself” becomes one of the most engaging problems in the novel, as it tests the philosophical theories

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<sup>8</sup> William Hutchings, “The Unintelligible Terms of an Incomprehensible Damnation”: Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, Sheol, and St. Erkenwald,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 27, no.2 (1981): 111.

of Descartes. The starting point for *The Unnamable*'s self-constitution is the premise that the cogito, the thinking self, is an antonymous, stable, and self-sustaining entity. Without a body, without the certainty of seeing anything outside the self, the unnamable first-person speaker is in the position of interpreting itself without the aid of external sensory impressions necessary for the constitution of self-consciousness. The speaking "I" of *The Unnamable* attempts to deploy Cartesian logic in order to constitute a stable *ego cogito*, the result being a circular and prototypical *mise en abyme* structure.

*The Unnamable* begins with three questions: "Where now? Who now? When now?" Answers to these three key narratological questions would enable the I speaker to define himself within the space of his narrative. These questions are, of course, left unanswered and the I speaker has to find his bearings with only what is at hand, which in this case seem to be figments of either memories or imagination (mostly characters interwoven from Beckett's previous texts). The process of coming to terms with this situation of an-archic subjectivity and (re)constructing a stable subject takes the form of exhaustive deduction, through which the speaking I succeeds in establishing but the barest facts of his existence: that he is sitting in the middle of a circle with characters (taken from previous works) orbiting him as planets would a star or electrons a nucleus. Sometimes these particles collide, but the speaker for the most part is left untouched and unnoticed by the passers-by. The association with clocks, time passing in space, movements at regular intervals allows the unnamable to measure time. There is at all times a sense of rhythmic and systematic progression that binds this fictional space. In keeping with Beckett's other works (e.g. *Endgame*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*), the association with being inside a skull is well founded. The texts give us no indication as to how long he has been there or for how long he will have to be there, though there are indications of gradual degeneration or entropy associated with the time spent in this state of waiting.

Attempts to constitute a stable *ego cogito* amount to little more than a parody of the Cartesian method, as logical deduction and induction reveal their circular logic. More specifically, the attempt to constitute subjectivity within a strictly textual context presupposes for its stability a final referent. Descartes' methodology is important, not only because of Beckett's academic interest in the philosopher, but because of the establishment of the modern subject which is attributed to Descartes, as the primary question leading, or, in fact, engendering, *The Unnamable* as a novel does not concern solely where and when, but who the I speaker is and how this consciousness comes to be. It is this question, pursued relentlessly by the I

speaker, that unravels the certainty traditionally accorded to the Cartesian subject, who is brought to existence by his ability to appropriate himself in and through not so much thought as language. It is also the answer to this question that remains inexpressible and beyond the scope of the textual constitution of the I speaker.

In *The Unnamable* and, to an ever greater extent, in Beckett's subsequent work, *Texts for Nothing*, the status of language as an Orphic mode of expression is radically brought into question and with it is suspended the idea of an extralinguistic or preontological source in which meaning is anchored. This is most clearly present in *The Unnamable*, where the protagonist in an attempt to isolate himself textually produces an endless array of names and "delegates" which speak on his behalf. The characters of Molloy, Malone, Mahood, Worm, Murphy are avatars of himself, created in spite of himself. "All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone" (1973: 305). This "me" would have to be the essential self, free from any fictionalized characterization; however, as it becomes clear, this essential self is itself a fiction, the unrepresentability of which perpetuates the novel. Whatever their names may be, these characters are referred to by Beckett as "caricatures, latest surrogates, moribunds, manikins, next vice-existers, miscreated puppets" and are seen as standing in place of something else, the speaking I, the self, the transcendent signified, the source of the narrative, which remains unnamable or ineffable.

The attempt at reduction to the pure "I" proves to be both self-contradictory and self-defeating in the most literal sense. Having divested the self of everything, every figment, every figure and voice, one finds no center, no unity; instead, one is left with nothing at all, no self at all. For beyond these pronouns, characters, names, there is no self. If the I resists this multiplicity, the I itself disappears. One is left then not with nothing as truth, but with truly nothing. (Davies 128)

I have chosen this quote because it seems to articulate a common understanding of Beckett's negativity. The self is reduced to nothingness through the rejection of the "delegates" and names that the I speaker takes on and later discards. Indeed, the notion of language and names being artificial constructs deferring the "true" logocentric self can be fleshed out by the essentialist bias at work in the novel and would be in line with the negative theological approach to Beckett. The narrator of *Company*

conveys this idea laconically and succinctly: “The unthinkable last of all. Unnamable. Last person. I” (17).

With the aim of assembling or reassembling consciousness with questions and contradictions the narrative unfolds, or rather implodes onto itself. The unnamable, unable to utter anything that would sustain its validity, as everything is invalidated as soon as it is uttered; the unnamable voice can only speak for the sake of speaking. The absent source of subjectivity, manifested through the disembodied and misappropriated voice, assumes the central focus of the novel. “But it’s entirely a matter of voices, no other metaphor is appropriate, they’ve blown me up with their voices, like a balloon, and even as I collapse it’s them I hear. Who, them?” (327). The concept of voice has a long philosophical history and is one of the most prevalent themes in Beckett’s fiction.<sup>9</sup> This is a concept that Ackerley calls Beckett’s “most profound literary creation” (607).

Because it is impossible to determine whether this voice comes from inside or outside the subject, the relation between what is heard and the hearer, a common theme in Beckett criticism, remains irresolvable. By the end of the novel, the speaking voice is disembodied, belonging to no-one, neither to the subject (if the term is still applicable to the unnamable) nor to any character catalogued during the course of the novel:

It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know, it’s round that I must revolve, of that I must speak, with this voice that is not mine, but can only be mine, since there is no one but me, or if there are others, to whom it might belong, they have never come near me. (1973: 309)

Despite being dispossessed, this non-diegetic voice does assume a function. Not only does it impose itself upon the consciousness of the unnamable, but it also imputes an obligation to speak of oneself. The narrator, “possessed of nothing but my voice, the voice, it may seem natural, once the obligation has been swallowed, that I should interpret it as an obligation to say something. But is it possible?” (1973: 313). This desire to go on, to speak despite there being nothing to speak about, despite there being nothing to speak with, seems to be the only condition

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<sup>9</sup> A detailed entry on the topic of the voice in Beckett’s work can be found in *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 607-19. In this well-researched entry, which can also be found in the form of an article, “The Uncertainty of Self: Samuel Beckett and the Location of Voice”, Ackerley describes the presence of this theme through Beckett’s work, citing that “the search for the voice is the great theme of *The Unnamable*” (611).

for the existence of the story and the “character” as textualized consciousness. The same situation of negativity generating desire is represented in *Molloy* as the search for the titular character’s mother, which, analogically, seems to constitute the determining force of Molloy’s existence. Once at his mother’s empty home Molloy recoils into a fetal position and the story ends. The same pattern of returning to the empty origin takes place in *The Unnamable*, where the search for the source of the voice does not reach its fruition, the story simply lingers on.

The search for the origin of the voice is itself a logocentric construct and thus initiates the *mise en abyme* that constitutes the core of Beckett’s inexpressibility. This endless regress can best be illustrated with reference to the myth of Echo and Narcissus. What links Narcissus to Echo is reflection, in its visual and acoustic dimensions, as a constitutive force in the formation of the subject. The figure of Echo, on the other hand, is an example of a subjectivity with no origin, as her voice, at the same time, belongs and does not belong to her. Much like Beckett’s characters in *The Unnamable* and *How It Is*, she can only repeat the words of others, which disassociates her words from her subjectivity. This uncertainty in effect precludes her presence as a speaking subject, as she is nothing more than a sounding board for other people’s words. It is only by means of appropriating the other’s voice that she can become present; only by speaking with the words of the other can her presence reveal itself. In other words, her presence in the world takes on a metaphorical form of a reflection, a mirror reflection of Narcissus’ words.

The origin of the voice is thus deferred onto another subject, whose voice is, in turn, deferred further back. The myth of Echo is thus an expression of one of the most prevalent *aporias* encountered in Beckett’s fiction: the origin as repetition. Being able to repeat only what has already been said, Echo and the Beckettian subject defer the moment of original evocation. Echo’s death, described as an eternity of repeating the voices of others, with neither body nor voice of her own, is analogous to the protagonist of *The Unnamable*. Both are deprived of a material body and are consigned to exist solely as dispossessed voices. Like Echo, Beckett’s characters claim to be only repeating or citing what has already been said, unable to say anything new, anything that would ultimately belong to them. Their existence precludes the possibility of distinguishing between reflections and the thing reflected.

The Echo-like subjectivity without origin is interestingly represented in *Krapp’s Last Tape*. In this one-man play we see what seem to be the last days of Krapp on his 69<sup>th</sup> birthday performing his annual ritual of reminiscing with the aid of a taped recording of himself from his 39<sup>th</sup>