

## LOOKING FORWARD TO THE END. /OU TOPOS/ AN APPROACH TO THE ART OF SAMUEL BECKETT

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The earliest version of the saying “no news is good news” can probably be found in the Jacobean period, when, in 1616, King James I of England wrote “no newis is bettir than evill newes”.<sup>1</sup> The equation “absence = goodness” seems appropriate to begin an essay on utopian implications in the work of Samuel Beckett. Beckett is the poet of negation —not to be confused with nothingness, an idea one cannot sustain for too long without feeling chilled to the bone. Beckett’s writings and plays do not provoke fear of some kind of existential void in their readers or spectators. Physical and mental shapes are too dense, too intensely felt, to elicit the dizziness the mind may suffer if forced to move close to the rim of speculation about existential blackout. Negation in Beckett has a more positive connotation than the atmosphere pervading his work might suggest. Beckett is an artist. Year after year, I find it difficult to convince my students of this fact —not the fact that he is an artist, but the fact that there is optimism in his work. When other arguments fail, I remind them that literature, however gloomy, is always an affirmation of life. Who would otherwise devote time and effort to imposing discipline on the imagination, to giving thought to feelings, to scanning the quotidian or the remote? Who would be willing to suffer the rebuke of words again and again unless fuelled by a strange and stubborn love of life? The crushing awareness of failure in Estragon’s famous words “Nothing to be done” has to be weighed on the same set of scales as the waiting-for-Godot premise of the title —the sound of the word suggesting, by the way, both good and not so good news.

James Knowlson, (1997: 263) the authorised biographer of Beckett, throws light on most of the sources that might explain the writer's penchant for negation, meaning both awareness of, and resistance to the idea of absence as deprivation. Here is one such source:

[Beckett] immersed himself deeply in Schopenhauer, who continued to influence his outlook, providing a clear justification for his view that suffering is the norm of human life, that will represents an unwelcome intrusion, and that real consciousness lies beyond human understanding.

Samuel Beckett's characters know what suffering and deprivation are. They seem to be painfully aware of the impossibility of attaining the kind of knowledge they wish to acquire. And yet, their stubborn faith in some form of enlightenment places them on the frontier between *ou-topos* and *eu-topos*, the liminal space where hope can resist the downward pull of despair and the forward-urging yet destructive force of the will as understood by Arthur Schopenhauer. Beckett himself, as described by his biographer and as perceived through his art, had a philosophical, hence contemplative, bent of mind that found in art the possibility of accommodating an aspiring sensibility and the negative capability that John Keats explained as the readiness to dwell in uncertainties without any "irritable reaching after fact and reason".<sup>2</sup>

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The refrain "nothing to be-done" in *Waiting for Godot*, also repeated by Mrs and Mr Rooney in *All That Fall*, and Clov's awareness in *Endgame* that "something is taking its course" are only two of the many examples of Beckett's insistence on the meagre and often non-existent control we have over the forces shaping and directing our existence. These examples also suffice to account for the inoculation of Schopenhauer's pessimism into the plays of Samuel Beckett, where the gap between what the characters wish to understand and the understanding lying within their reach is always unbridgeable. Such tension between the real and the ideal is a constant source of suffering, one that Beckett's characters seem to have learned to accept and live with. Beckett does not explain how the road to acceptance, however long and painful, has been walked. He is not an author interested in processes but in the outcome of processes. He does not pose the question: "How are we going to live?" but "What are we going to do now that we have lived through everything?" —which dramatically wipes out any possibility of choice, since all possibilities have already exhausted themselves in failure. Hence the passive temperament of the characters. Hence, too, the stripped-down, compacted, static nature of Beckett's settings and sense-making. Once again, the philosophical and aesthetic intensity pervading his works sends us back to Schopenhauer, for whom only art and aestheticism could provide man with some kind of liberation from the tyranny of will, and therefore from suffering. In other words, the negation of the

will might be achieved through a spiritual disposition favouring renunciation, or through the aesthetic craft of channelling this blind and raging force into the pent-up intensity of art (Schopenhauer 1987: 63-65).<sup>3</sup>

In the plays of Samuel Beckett there are examples of both survival strategies, the spiritual and the aesthetic. It is around these that this essay revolves. Seldom do we find a character who has not expressed his or her desire to move from a meaningless here-and-now to an unknown there, or who has not attempted various forms of conscious or unconscious artistic sublimation of a predicament to make the waiting bearable. Spiritual longing and aesthetic consolation function as slow-moving, often stuck or jerky, life-conveyor belts, where Beckett's characters are being transported and forced to move in circles, luggage-like, waiting to be claimed and taken elsewhere by some caring hand. In his plays, the frustrated attempts to find a meaningful *topos* is strikingly visualised through ageing, ailing, or crippled bodies, and through disembodied voices emphasising the inability of the mind to find answers to questions that baffle reason. The desire to flee reality is also stubbornly present in the broken and increasingly minimalist discourse adopted by Beckett, who reflects upon the evolution of his own style in the following passage:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding. (in Knowlson 1997: 352)

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The increasing concern for language as the expressive kernel of experience has led numerous critics to analyse the paradox of how such an underfed form of discourse as Beckett's should be able to produce such vigorous, vital and protean meaning. In *Samuel Beckett y la narración reflexiva*, José Ángel García Landa says that Beckett's broken language is his way of incorporating chaos into his art rather than fighting against it. (García Landa, 1992: 245-246; my translation). Terry Eagleton (*The Guardian* 2006) opts for a down-to-earth, anti-essentialist appraisal of Beckett's artistic and linguistic stances. He writes:

Beckett's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary is crammed with literary events celebrating the life of the modern age's most lovable pessimist, most of them, one imagines, awash with talk of the timeless human condition portrayed in his work. Nothing could be further from the truth. For one thing, Beckett treated such portentous interpretations of his work with typical Irish debunkery. "No symbol where none intended", he once reminded the critics. For another, he was not some timeless spirit but a southern Irish Protestant, part of a besieged minority of cultural aliens caught uneasily within a triumphalistic Catholic Free State. As Anglo-Irish Big Houses were burnt by Republicans during the war of independence, many Protestants fled to the Home

Counties. The paranoia, chronic insecurity and self-conscious marginality of Beckett's work make a good deal more sense in this light. So does the stark, stripped quality of his writing, with its Protestant aversion to frippery and excess.

No appraisal of Beckett's art is to be discarded as being untrue. Beckett, like Shakespeare, belongs to all of us, and therefore each of us can only attempt to explain the kind of intimate relation we enter into with his work. I like to think that Beckett's art is a form of prayer, that the repeated words and rhythms in his plays are litanies. Even the most seemingly absurd utterances sound to me like praying. After all, one does not pray from a position of certainty—one should not, and need not. It is out of a sense of alienation and ignorance that one addresses some deity or other, directs an appeal to some promise of authority or solace beyond one's own inner resources. Real prayer is not coherent rational discourse. It is a kind of babbling, a speaking in tongues. I also like to think (without this being misconstrued as self-aggrandisement) that Beckett's characters feel the way I do when I am puzzled and disoriented, yet willing to continue in the hope that some of the fragments of my own experience may slowly or suddenly become more meaningful. I wonder how far James Knowlson (1977: 237) was from this thought when he wrote the following:

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Beckett found himself drawn into restating his own criterion of true art, in which he not only repeated his view that the authentic poem or picture was a prayer but developed the image further than he had ever done up to that point: "The art (picture) that is a prayer sets up prayer, releases prayer in the onlooker, ie. Priest: Lord have mercy upon us". People: "Christ have mercy upon us". This is an attitude that few readers will associate with Beckett, yet it was essential to his view of art at the time, whether this was the art of the writer, painter or musician.

The time Knowlson is referring to here is the period between the two World Wars when Beckett was in Germany and "listened to anti-Jewish sentiments with acute distaste" (Knowlson 1997:237). Art as prayer would suit a time haunted by the prospect of world conflict. In fact, art as prayer suits any context, for art, like prayer, or utopia, wishes us well.

Beckett's characters pray for a way out of suffering, a release from endless waiting, ignorance, even life. Some prayers are pregnant with longing, like Mrs Rooney's in *All That Fall*:

Oh no coughing or spitting or bleeding or vomiting, just drifting gently into the higher life, and remembering, remembering... all the silly unhappiness... as though... it had never happened... What did I do with that handkerchief? (Beckett 1985: 219)

Some are like empty begging-bowls, as in *Waiting for Godot*:

**Vladimir:** Let's wait and see what he says

**Estragon:** Who?

**Vladimir:** Godot.

**Estragon:** Good idea.

**Vladimir:** Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.

**Estragon:** On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes.

**Vladimir:** I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it.

**Estragon:** What exactly did we ask him for?

**Vladimir:** Were you not there?

**Estragon:** I can't have been listening.

**Vladimir:** Oh... nothing very definite.

**Estragon:** A kind of prayer.

**Vladimir:** Precisely. (Beckett 1988: 18)

There is also the category of “tantrum prayer”, as in *Endgame*:

**Hamm** (*to Clov*):

You'll finish him later. Let us pray to God.

(*Clov is trying to kill a rat in the kitchen*).

**Clov:**

Again!

**Nagg:**

Me sugar-plum!

**Hamm:**

God first!

Are you right?

**Clov:** (*resigned*)

Off we go.

**Hamm:** (*to Nagg*)

And you?

**Nagg:** (*clasping hands, closing eyes, in a gabble*)

Our Father which art —

**Hamm:** Silence! In silence! Where are your manners?

(*pause*)

Off we go.

(*attitudes of prayer. silence. abandoning his attitude discouraged*)

Well?

**Clov:** (*abandoning his attitude*)

What a hope! And you?

**Hamm:**

Sweet damn all!

(to Nagg)

And you?

**Nagg:** Wait!

(*pause. abandoning his attitude.*)

Nothing doing!

**Hamm:**

The bastard! He doesn't exist! (Beckett 1958: 54-55)

This is a curious and significant tantrum, as Hamm has, throughout the play, adopted the tyrannical attitude of a *roi sans soleil*, an absolute monarch deriving his power directly from a non-existent deity; hence his fury. His obsession with being at the centre, the fact of having let Mother Pegg die of darkness, and his asking Clov to place him under the window to feel the light on his face are elements pointing in the same direction. In *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God*, Mary Bryden writes:

[Hamm] gravitates, in his immobilised status, towards a magnetic central position, like that described by Christ: 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me' (John 12:32). (Bryden 1988: 141)

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The attraction to a still centre is a form of prayer; stasis is the ultimate act of mimesis on the part of the individual, his most desperate desire to please God, the unmoved mover. Vladimir and Estragon, Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell, Winnie, or A and B (Billy), the protagonists in *Rough for Theater II*—most of Beckett's characters are suspended in an endless moment of intense anticipation, what Borges beautifully describes as the imminence of a revelation that never takes place ("inminencia de una revelación que no se produce" (in *La Vanguardia* 1999),<sup>4</sup> a definition of art that applies aptly to Beckett.

Indeed, stasis is also a synthesis of past motion, e-motion, and experiences—in art, Keats' Grecian Urn. Samuel Beckett, however, depicts a paradox, a form of stasis that walks and talks before us; hence the different tempos in the walking and the talking. Mind and body have different rhythms, though both feed on memory to lengthen their days. But the kind of memory that nourishes the mind works both as an illusion of permanence and as a curse. Memory is the historicising capacity of the imagination to keep itself company. Remembering is an effortless creative act, art being, along with spiritual longing, the only path from *ou topos* to *eu topos*, as has already been suggested. Some characters, such as Winnie in *Happy Days*, the protagonist of *Rockaby*, the old man in *Krapp's Last Tape*, or the woman whose mouth we see in *Not I*, use memory as the source of a tale that seems to be alive and feeding off them for its own survival. Some other characters fancy themselves to be word-hoarding storytellers forcing others to listen to the same tale again and again, thus making Shakespeare's famous line frighteningly true: "So long lives this, and this gives life to thee". Vladimir, by contrast, resists, refusing to listen to

Estragon's nightmares, though engaging with him in an exercise of memory scansion. Nagg in *Endgame* tells Nell the story of the tailor who was a slow but better artisan than God himself, and Hamm imposes his *récits, grands* and *petits*, on the other characters. About the role of the narrator in Beckett's works, José Ángel García Landa (1992: 125) writes:

La primera persona beckettiana desafía los esquemas de la narración homodiegética. Por ejemplo, sólo aparentemente señala una identidad entre el narrador y el personaje. En lugar de la afirmación de identidad característica de la narración homodiegética tenemos una negación continua. El narrador al cual se alude como "yo" puede transformarse inopinadamente en un "él", y ello sin que se nos haya introducido en la narración de otro enunciador. Así, la identidad del narrador con el personaje se mantiene pero él ya no es más que una máscara desechada.<sup>5</sup>

García Landa traces the evolution of the binary of narration-narrator in Beckett. In early writings such as *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), García Landa observes, it is difficult to delimit the areas of character and narrator. In *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934), which he describes as being more disciplined in this respect, the voice of the narrator is the destructive voice of the textual author. García Landa (1992: 124) goes on to say that in these early writings there is a display of erudition on the part of the narrator, who looks down on his characters from the heights of baroque rhetoric. The richness of Beckett's earlier discourse may not only be related to the influence of James Joyce, but also to the loquaciousness and eloquence of Irish orality and the old- and new-world literature of the Spanish Siglo de Oro that Beckett was engaged in reading and translating partly because of his teaching involvement in Romance languages at Trinity College.

As Beckett enters ever more deeply into the process of pruning his style, a process which goes hand in hand with that of dismantling past assumptions about the power of language to explain reality, the tension between narrator and narration is no longer a matter of hierarchies but of uselessness, pointlessness, chaos. Nobody seems to be in control of anything; language leads nowhere, explains nothing, clarifies nothing. Action, mental and physical, is also reduced to sterile movement. Ed Jewinski (1990: 142), for example, has the following to say about the dramatic piece *Company* (1979), which portrays a solitary man listening to a voice recalling slices of his past, usually marked by emotional solitude:

the particular formulations or words with which man attempts not only to understand his 'self' but also to capture relations beyond his 'self' are inevitably inadequate. For Beckett, the human circumstance is, at best, 'Ill seen, Ill said'. The self is ever receding beyond the verbal expression of the discrete experiences with which man attempts to establish a secure identity. Imagine as he will, man cannot give presence to himself. As the word *imagine* implies: man can only give 'image' or 'shape' to what is *not* 'present'.

Lucky, in *Waiting for Godot*, is a good example of the idea that however long and heavily freighted the memory of the narrator might be, it has no bearing, no influence on his present. Even worse, it is *precisely* because of the amount of information stored greedily, for its own sake or to quench yet exacerbate some existential thirst, that the effect appears to be so enslaving and destructive.

But because in literature, as in life, interpretation lies in the mind of whoever does the interpreting, I should like to see the linguistic wasteland in which Beckett's characters move (or stand and sit stock-still) as a kind of limbo, or perhaps purgatory, where they expiate the ills of a logocentric and egocentric experience. Michael Billington (*The Guardian* 2006) cites the words of Cyril Connolly, who said that Beckett is "the poet of terminal stages" —which takes me back to the beginning of this essay where I asserted that Beckett is the poet of negation, yet not of nothingness.

Beckett portrays humanity at the doors of the garden from which we were once expelled. As Vladimir himself observes, they are mankind. This occurs in the second act of *Waiting for Godot* when Pozzo, now blind, and Lucky, now mute, have stumbled over themselves in a vaudevillean pratfall and, flat on their back, are full of renewed resolve:

**Vladimir:** Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. (Beckett 1988: 79)

Sometimes Beckett's characters have moments of surprising insight into their situation, as if, now and then, amidst all the slapstick, the author wanted to provide a glimpse of new possibilities for meaningful connections. I have myself made what I hope might be a meaningful and thought-provoking connection. I have always felt that Milton and Beckett narrate the same story. Milton concentrates on the departure of Adam and Eve from paradise. Beckett depicts the end of the postlapsarian journey that is undertaken. If the fall was caused by pride, Vladimir and Estragon seem to be pretty well ready for re-admission. They have no ambitions, no understanding, almost no memories, and no expectations other than what Godot may bring to them. In the last book of *Paradise Lost*, Milton (1998: lines 633-649) recounts the transition from myth to history:

High in front advanced,  
The brandished sword of God before them blazed,  
Fierce as a comet; which with torrid heat,  
And vapour as the Libyan air adust,



Began to parch that temperate clime; whereat  
In either hand the hastening Angel caught  
Our lingering parents, and to the eastern gate  
Led them direct, and down the cliff as fast  
To the subjected plain; then disappeared.  
They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld  
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,  
Waved over by that flaming brand; the gate  
With dreadful faces thronged, and fiery arms:  
Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon;  
The world was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:  
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way.

Beckett's characters have walked all the way back home. Theirs is the last stage on a long journey filled with travail, a journey whose wayside and high-road spectacles and pleasures have been almost completely forgotten. All they have is a deeply rooted sense of failure and alienation. And because there is nothing else to be done, they inhabit a liminal space, and a time of tense, intense and intensive expectation, even a form of manic busy-ness. With understandable bouts of despair, they wait as patiently and stoically as they can for the long-awaited gift of forgiveness. As with the transgression and guilt suffered by Franz Kafka's K., they don't even know why they have to be forgiven. Perhaps for being alive. This *ex-nihilo* condition, I would contend, is the *primum mobile* of all aspirations to utopia.

## Notes

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1. [http://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin\\_board/45/messages/451.html](http://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/45/messages/451.html).

2. Letter to George and Thomas Keats, Sunday, 21 December 1817.

3. Schopenhauer establishes a difference between "Will" as the-thing-in-itself, or life that blindly strives for itself, and "Willkür" as Will bridled by intellect. See also *The World as Will and Idea* (1819), ed. David Berman (New York: AMS Press, 1975), vol.3: 135-138.

4. Jorge Luis Borges, "La muralla y los libros" (1950), in Borges, *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1952).

5. My translation: The use of the first-person narrator in Beckett defies the pattern of homodiegetic narration. Such use, for example, is misleading as regards the identification of character with narrator. Instead of the affirmation of identity which characterises the homodiegetic narrator, we find a constant negation of such affirmation. The narrator who is alluded to as "I" may unexpectedly become a "he" even though no other speaker has been introduced. Thus, the identification of narrator with character is maintained, but the latter has already become a discarded mask.

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