



## AESTHETICS OF NEGATION IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S FICTION: ADDRESSING THE EXISTENTIAL APORIA IN A LITERATURE OF PARADOX

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### ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett innovates in fiction as much as he does in the theatre. His work expands the scope of fiction in unprecedented ways as he strives to appropriate the chaos of human condition and give some semblance of expression to man's existential dilemmas. As an existentialist thinker Beckett strived for an aesthetics, an artistic mould that would go with his way of thinking and perceiving the human condition. He devised a new kind of hardcore aesthetics that would offer hard-hitting expression to his existential philosophy. Beckett's fiction is noted for works such as *Murphy*, the trilogy -- *Moloy*, *Malon Dies* and *The Unnamable*; as well as ventures such as *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*. In Beckett's fiction, especially in his late prose works, we come across an artistic philosophy that allows him to develop his narrative through negative propositions. This new kind of aesthetics contradicts the conventions of structural dialectics in normative novelistic discourse; and Beckett registers the deviation as he flirts with the modes of prose narratives in his existentialist vein. He imagines a voice tangled in an unintelligible inertia and gives it some semblance of audible expression through negative reflection. Unlike the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, the portrayal of the mind in Beckett is essentially imbued with his aesthetics of negation that affords assertion only by despair and negation. The dialectics of negation begets a synthesis that is negative in form but often dons the guise of a resolve, albeit a tentative one.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, human condition, existentialist dilemmas, expression, aesthetics of negation.

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The spirit of an art is defined by the aesthetics that conceives it. Aesthetics contributes to that aspect of a work of art which Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* calls 'claritus'<sup>1</sup> – the radiance of an artistic composition. An artist works by the light of his creative philosophy – his aesthetics – that defines the colour of his expression. For Samuel Beckett the colour of

expression was that of procrastination and despair. Beckett was not a man of conventional letters and he found the traditional modes of artistic expression inapt for his avant-garde approach to life and art. As an existentialist thinker Beckett strived for an aesthetics, an artistic mould that would go with his way of thinking and perceiving the human condition. He devised a new kind of hardcore aesthetics that

would offer hard-hitting expression to his existential philosophy. In Beckett's fiction, especially in his late prose works, we come across an artistic philosophy that allows him to develop his narrative through negative propositions. This new kind of aesthetics contradicts the conventions of structural dialectics in normative novelistic discourse; and Beckett registers the deviation as he flirts with the modes of prose narratives in his existentialist vein. In Beckett the flair for the existential finds expression in a prose informed by the refractions of a negative potential – the aesthetics of negation. The intensity of expression goes parallel with the angst of existential imagination in a context that conceives of the unstable movements of the disintegrating consciousness prior to an arrant collapse. He imagines a voice tangled in an unintelligible inertia and gives it some semblance of audible expression through negative reflection. Beckett's fiction is noted for works such as *Murphy* (1938), the trilogy -- *Moloy* (1951 [in French], English Version in 1955), *Malon Dies* (1951 [as *Malone Meurt*], English version in 1958) and *The Unnamable* (1953 [as *L'innommable*], English version in 1960) ; as well as ventures such as *Company* (1980), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982) and *Worstward Ho* (1983)<sup>2</sup>. The point of view in his narrative is invariably in flux – ranging from third person limited to unreliable first person – as he strives to appropriate the chaos of human condition and give some semblance of order to man's intellectual dilemmas. Unlike the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, the portrayal of the mind in Beckett is essentially imbued with his aesthetics of negation that affords assertion only by despair and negation. The dialectics of negation begets a synthesis that is negative in form but often dons the guise of a resolve, albeit a tentative one. The 'recirculation' of negative propositions in Beckett brings us back to the cusp in existential streaming: "you must go on. I can't go on. I will go on" (Beckett, *Three Novels* 245).

The present paper attempts to explore how Beckett's aesthetics of negation responds to the paradox of human existence in an increasingly indifferent world of our times. Present human condition is more complicated than ever. Existentialism offered man the space to live and act subjectively, forming subjective morality and values

in the expense of being responsible for the consequences of your way of living and acting. But the existential world of a new time (i.e. our time) has stripped man of the prospect of living, leaving him only to exist. In the anarchy of material options and consumerism man has lost the option of 'living.' One knows he/she is almost under obligation to exist without knowing the significance of that existence. And it is precisely in this context of abject meaninglessness of existence that Beckett's literature of negation seems more relevant than ever. Appropriating Beckett's celebrated expression of the queer obligation 'to express,' one can say, "there is nothing for which to exist [express], nothing with which to exist [express], nothing in which to exist [express]. Still there is the obligation to exist" (Beckett, *Three Dialogues* 139)<sup>3</sup>. In order to cast light on the present discourse the paper seeks to study the major dimensions of Beckett's aesthetics of negation as well as its relative success and failure in the cultural economy of post-modern Europe.

As a young man, Samuel Beckett (1906-89) hoped that writing could provide psychic authenticity and true representation of the physical world. Instead, he found himself immersed in artificialities and self-enclosed word games. Daniel Albright argues that Beckett sought escape through allegories of artistic frustration and the art of non-representation and estrangement (87). The paradox which colours Beckett's work is that he is trying to make sense of something which, by definition, cannot be rationalized. As a result, we are forced to acknowledge the truth in Beckett's statement concerning the endeavours of the artist; for him "to be an artist is to fail, as no others dare fail, that failure is his world and to shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living" (*Three Dialogues* 145).

Any discourse on Beckett's aesthetics of negation invariably concerns his role in contemporary philosophical aesthetics. In Beckett's works art, as a negative truth, comes to its complete exhaustion by means of a series of 'endgames' that progressively involve philosophy, language and every individual and minimal form of expression.

Now, before coming to the most celebrated aspect of Beckett's aesthetics, namely negativity, let's recall Georges Bataille's concept of absolute negativity. In *Inner Experience* Bataille propagates that to achieve the mystic inner experience one has to sacrifice truth, knowledge, and, ultimately, speech (156). But Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues that Bataille's project falls victim to what she calls "generalized positivity." Bataille's argument fails to sustain a notion of absolute negativity outside the workings of a general economy of value (93). In this context let's discuss about the viability of the literature of negation itself. In case of Beckett, Smith argues, literature functions within the general cultural economy as a 'moral technology' which recuperates absolute negativity as relative positivity (121). And if literature functions as a cultural technology of positivity, any notion of a literature of negation would be a contradiction in terms.

Samuel Beckett's writing seems to be predicated on a series of negations: not only do his fictional and dramatic works relentlessly undermine literary conventions of narrative, plot, character, action, identity, sequence and closure, but this process of negation extends even to the signifying possibilities of language. The self-cancelling structure of many of Beckett's later prose narratives – "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered" (*The Unnamable* 3), and the wordlessness of the late theatre works, seem to enact a philosophy of linguistic nihilism. *Worstward Ho* begins thus:

On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on.  
Say for be said. Missaid. From now say for missaid.  
. . . All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better. (*Nohow On [Company, Ill Seen Ill Said and Worstward Ho]* 100)

The "say on" in the second sentence becomes "be said on" in the next sentence. "Be said on" points to a deliberate emptying out of agency or identity in the speaker. *Worstward Ho* is an attempt to present an utterance devoid of either a speaker or an addressee. Language is also stripped off its

referential function in the insistence that all 'saying' is 'mis-saying.'

In *Worstward Ho* the narrator says "fail better" and not "fail best" since failing best itself implies a sort of positivity – resolute synthesis of a kind -- at the turn of the negative dialectics. Thus Beckett carefully delineates a negativity which would stop just short of the absolute negativity of nothingness, at an "unlessenable least", an "unworsenable worst", a "meremost minimum" that is "better than nothing" because it is "a little better worse than nothing so" (*Nohow On* 101).

There is another problematic area in Beckett's literature of the interior. In a cultural economy cultural objects and cultural choices are assumed to be reflecting the interiority of the self. Hence culture and language seem to determine the 'self' in literature. That is why, as Ian Hunter argues, this illusion of interior authenticity is itself the product of language and culture and consequently all of Beckett's most ingenious gestures of negation inevitably become part of the relentless positivity of culture (353).

However the prospect of such apparent lapse in Beckett's negation project only hints at a paradox. In his asymptotic approach towards negativity Beckett seems to have succeeded to escape the spiral of Hegelian dialectics, at least theoretically. But in practical consideration he somehow falls victim to the process of recuperation. So, he both fails and succeeds in the same run. Therefore the most apparent prospect of his failure itself seems paradoxical.

Beckett asserted that his literature is about man as 'non-caner' and 'non-doer', and for man as 'non-caner' and 'non-doer' (*Three Dialogues* 144). Yet, in *Worstward Ho* we find the narrator uttering: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (*Nohow On* 100). Hence the contradiction: how can a 'non-caner' and 'non-doer' try or fail? But at the same time we should not consider the issues of 'trying' or 'doing' out of place since in an existential world there is the obligation 'to do' in spite of the fact that there is nothing or no reason 'to do'. Similarly, in his art Beckett has vented his despondence concerning the prospect of expression: "there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which

to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Three Dialogues* 139). The same complexity arises here once again: if there is nothing to express how can there be any obligation to express?

And therein lies the paradox for which the existential obligation of man, and not Beckett, is responsible. Therefore, it is not a failure on the part of Beckett; rather it is Beckett's attempt to respond to the paradox of existential complexes of existence. So, more than a literature of negation, Beckett's art, especially in his late prose works, seems to be a literature of paradox – a literature in aporia.

There are some contradictions and paradoxical phenomena to be traced in his aesthetic approach too. As in Foucault's notion of transgression and limit, the act of transgression itself affirms the signification of limit, Beckett in his approach towards linguistic nihilism paradoxically affirms the signification of language (Foucault 47). In a similar vein Beckett attempted a literature of frustration and disintegration. But his paratactic style and use of paradoxes and aporia renders his literature of negation exciting and intriguing.

Hence, as the preceding study unravels, Beckett's articulation, especially in his late prose works, appears to be a literature of paradox -- a literature in aporia -- in its attempt to address the paradox of existence in aporia; and his aesthetics of negation endeavours to affirm man's right to life by negation. His narrative often progresses through reflections of despair and disintegration, yet in the midst of all 'missayings' and 'failings' his aesthetics of negation does not fail his expression of the existential resolve: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." (Beckett, *Nohow On* 100)

#### Notes:

1. In Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Stephen Dedalus, the young protagonist, expounds his theory of art following the footsteps of Thomas Aquinas. He talks about three necessary conditions for artistic effect that correspond to the three stages in the process of appreciation of the artistic effect in a work of art – *integritus* (meaning 'wholeness'), *consonantia* (meaning 'harmony') and *claritus* (meaning 'radiance'). Stephen himself admits that the concept of *claritus* is quite a vague one.

He goes on to give three different interpretations for the term. As he argues, *claritus* could refer to a kind of symbolism or idealism for the artistic effect of an object, or the artistic discovery of the divine purpose in the object in question or the force of generalisation that transforms an aesthetic image to a universal one. Then, of course, he gives his own interpretation of the term. *Claritus* for him is the 'what-ness' of a thing. It refers to that aspect of a thing which makes it the very thing which it is.

2. The works *Company* (1980), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982) and *Worstward Ho* (1983) were published together under the title *Nohow On* in 1989. All the quotations from *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho* are documented in this paper with reference to *Nohow On*.
3. The original quotation is: "there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Three Dialogues* 139).

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