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# Revising the Human in Samuel Beckett's Aesthetic Education

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Kelly S. WALSH (Yonsei University)

Vladimir: (*stutteringly resolute*). To treat a man ... (*gesture towards Lucky*) ... like that ... I think that ... no ... a human being ... no ... it's a scandal! Estragon: (*not to be outdone*). A disgrace! *He resumes his gnawing.*

– Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (25–26)

## I. Introduction

Herbert Blau, not uncontroversially, once called Samuel Beckett “the congenital last holdout of humanism,” an artist “who couldn’t shake the pathos for all its running sores, the laughter of mutilations, and whose cruelty never prevented you from having a good cry, right up the *risus porsus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh” (*Sails* 94). “Astride of a grave and a difficult birth,” Didi reflects, with uncharacteristic lucidity, near the close of *Godot*: “Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (*He listens*.) But habit is a great deadener” (104–05). Between birth, which is ultimately the death of us, and the grave, there is, for Beckett, suffering and play—suffering which is play—and the habit that deadens the pain of being human, muffling, so to speak, “our cries.” “The suffering of being” (Beckett, *Proust* 516), from Beckett’s first works to the last, is unerringly shown to be unredemptive and meaningless—without (determinate) end or purpose—yet, from within all the unshakable pathos of “a ruefully inadequate humanity” (Blau, *Sails* 40), a playful, oxymoronic sensibility emerges, one that Blau aptly describes as “cruelly humane” (13). And, I would like to argue, it is precisely this appalling humaneness, this cruel playfulness that is constitutive of Beckett’s aesthetic education, and that which makes him something other than an antihumanist or posthumanist.

## II. “Cruelly Humane” Humanism

It is undeniable, as Andrew Gibson writes, that “Beckett’s principle targets have always been manifestations of traditional humanism” (150). This is evident in his works’ emphasis, particularly in the prose, on the inhuman force of language, which speaks the writing voices from without, as well as the failure of the Cartesian *cogito* to provide a stable foundation for the self, a coherent identity or unified “I” and a discernible *telos*:<sup>1</sup>

I say to the body, Up with you now, and I can feel it struggling, like an old hack foundered in the street, struggling no more, struggling again, till it gives up. I say to head, Leave it alone, stay quiet, it stops breathing, then pants on worse than ever. I am far from all that wrangle, I shouldn’t bother with it, I need nothing, neither to go on nor stay where I am, it’s truly all one to me, I should turn away from it all, away from the body, away from the head, let them work it out between them, let them cease, I can’t, it’s I would have to cease. (Beckett, *Texts for Nothing* 100)

This persistent sense of confusion and ignorance, the painful lack of knowledge of ends and purposes, is also endemic in Beckett’s dramatic works, where the focus upon the frail, infirm, and decaying body is, if anything, intensified. “Can there be misery—(*he yawns*)—loftier than mine?” (2), asks Hamm, the blind, bloodied, tyrannical paraplegic, from his wheelchair in the opening gestures of *Endgame*. “No doubt. Formerly. But now?” (2), Hamm mordantly responds, reflexively mocking his suffering and its incapacity to achieve the grandeur and pathos of classical tragedy, while signaling the utter lack of catharsis and closure his play will bring about. But even as the drama and prose work to undermine any “totalization of human experience” and “question the old confidence in the representational value of narrative” (Rabaté 706), there remain in Beckett’s works, and not without poignancy, the “bits and scraps” (Beckett, *How It Is* 7) of human grandeur, a useless, self-recriminating, but “unpurgeable nostalgia” (Blau, “The Commodicus Vicus” 29) for what, most likely, never was.<sup>2</sup> In Beckett, there is always the unquantifiable admixture

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1. Regarding Beckett’s prose works, Alain Badiou speaks of “the torture of the *cogito*” (51), in which the “body is [...] held captive” by the writing voice (10).
  2. The phrase “bits and scraps,” or some variant thereof, appears several dozen times in *How*
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of abjection and dignity, and despite all the “immense confusion” (Beckett, *Godot* 91), the enduring concern is the human, its ends and purposes, even as the work self-consciously fails, again and again, in its efforts to discern any such end or purpose.

Jean-Michel Rabaté, quite correctly in my view, sees in Beckett a “critique of humanism in the name of the ‘impossible,’” with this critical interrogation repeatedly instantiated through the “experience of impotence, dispossession, and unknowing” (706). But even this notion of the “impossible,” as we shall see in Beckett’s revision or overturning of traditional Western aesthetics—especially the Kantian-Schillerian variety—fundamentally retains a relation, however indeterminate, to the human in all its degradation and ignorance. As such, it might be termed an impossible humanism, as opposed to “a new antihumanism, expressed in a literature that negated or exhausted itself as fully as possible” (Rabaté 706). That is, while the human in Beckett may remain unknowable, the drive or obligation—the source of which remains unintelligible—to know it and its ends is irrepressible, or, at least, unavoidable: “I know it’s not me, but it’s too late now, too late to deny it, the knowledge is there, the bits and scraps, flickering on and off, turn about, winking on the storm, in league to fool me” (Beckett, *Texts for Nothing* 110). And, as Stanley Cavell suggests, the human being in Beckett’s universe cannot help but mean, be given to mean (117), even as such meaning defies the myriad attempts to systematize it. The artist’s compulsion to express is thus coincident with the impossible desire to know the human condition—an aporia that also enlivens, as Alain Badiou writes of *Godot*, the “obstinate desire for something to happen” (75).

In its statement awarding Beckett the 1969 Nobel Prize in Literature, the Swedish Academy recognized “his writing, in which—in new forms for the novel and drama—the destitution of modern man acquires its elevation” (“The Nobel Prize”). The Academy further elucidated this paradoxical notion of “elevation,” the specific context being post-World War II Europe, which,

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*It Is*; I have cited the first instance. Badiou attributes a more affirmative capacity to this nostalgia, which, he writes, “gives rise in the prose to fragments of beauty,” “giving us the power to suppose that one day [...] the eye will open and, under its astonished gaze, in the nuances of the grey-black of being, something will lighten” (71). While possibility always remains in Beckett, possibility engendered by nostalgia, in my reading, is precisely that which is not believed in. See, for instance, “Text 6” of *Texts for Nothing*, where the voice writes of “the nostalgia for that slime where the Eternal breathed and his son wrote” (124).

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*Godot* suggests, is little more than “A charnel-house! A charnel-house!” (71):

[T]he degradation of humanity is a recurrent theme in Beckett’s writing and to this extent, his philosophy, simply accentuated by elements of the grotesque and of tragic farce, can be described as a negativism that cannot desist from descending to the depths. To the depths it must go because it is only there that pessimistic thought and poetry can work their miracles. [...] The perception of human degradation—which we have witnessed, perhaps, to a greater extent than any previous generation—is not possible if human values are denied. But the experience becomes all the more painful as the recognition of human dignity deepens. This is the source of inner cleansing, the life force nevertheless, in Beckett’s pessimism. It houses a love of mankind that grows in understanding as it plumbs further into the depths of abhorrence, a despair that has to reach the utmost bounds of suffering to discover that compassion has no bounds. From that position, in the realms of annihilation, rises the writing of Samuel Beckett like a miserere from all mankind, its muffled minor key sounding liberation to the oppressed, and comfort to those in need. (“The Nobel Prize”)

While the Swedish Academy may have exaggerated the extent to which Beckettian “negativism” works “miracles” from the depths of human degradation, revealing an expansive “love of mankind,” the quote nevertheless put its finger on what is most vital and singular about Beckett’s pessimism: its irrepressible “life force,” which, in thinking feelingly through the depths of human abjection and suffering, has the capacity to revitalize the imagination and engender the impetus to go on.<sup>3</sup>

At the risk of making too incongruous a transition, the Swedish Academy’s emphasis upon Beckett’s excavations “into the depths of abhorrence” finds

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3. “Go on” is an oft-repeated phrase throughout Beckett’s oeuvre, as we see, most famously, in the conclusion to *The Unnamable*: “where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (414). Badiou, for one, fundamentally argues against reading Beckett through the lenses of “negativism,” existentialism, nihilism, pessimism, or absurdism; in short, “A Beckett convinced that beyond the obstinacy of words there is nothing but darkness and void” (40). Emphasizing Beckett’s “courage,” his will to “go on,” Badiou continues: “Neither existentialism nor a modern baroque. The lesson of Beckett is a lesson in measure, exactitude and courage” (40).

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another articulation in “das fruchtbare Bathos der Erfahrung” (Beckett, *Watt* 245), which Beckett included in the “Addenda” to *Watt*. This “fruitful bathos of experience” comes from Immanuel Kant, who used the term in its original Greek sense of “low place” to defend his use of the word “transcendental” against charges of idealism:

High towers and the metaphysically-great man resembling them, around both of which there is usually much wind, are not for me. My place is the fertile bathos of experience; and the word: transcendental [...] does not signify something that surpasses all experience, but something that indeed precedes experience (*a priori*), but that, all the same, is destined to nothing more than solely to make cognition from experience possible. (*Prolegomena* 125)

Kant's point here is that although transcendent, *a priori* categories make cognition or understanding of the sensible world possible, knowledge cannot transcend experience. He insists, then, that his philosophy remains firmly grounded in experience; it is not perched high above this human world, where it would be prey to whatever strong gusts pass through. For Beckett, whatever his critiques, inversions, or parodies of Kant's philosophical system,<sup>4</sup> it is undeniable that he, perhaps more than any artist ever has, remained entrenched in the “low places” of human existence, amidst “the harmless obscenities of being,” which, as Blau puts it, “help keep us human, and conscious of our humanity” (*Sails* 21). What is to be learned from this, apart from that, is debatable<sup>5</sup> — a greater capacity,

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4. One of these would be the Kantian principle that moral concepts have their origin *a priori* in reason, which gives rise to the “categorical imperative”; we see this parodied late in *Godot*, as Didi and Gogo consider whether or not to help the now-blind Pozzo (90). Beckett's revision of Kantian aesthetics, including the notion of “purposiveness without purpose,” will be addressed below. P. J. Murphy, in his overview of Beckett's critical or “dialogical” (209) engagement with Kant, emphasizes the latter as “the seminal modern philosopher who has exercised a decisive vision-shaping influence on Beckett” (194). Beckett's literary appropriations and critiques of Kant, Murphy points out, are highly original and creative; nevertheless, “Beckett found Kant to be an indispensable figure who supplied him with a philosophical grammar for realigning the proliferation of negatives encountered at the boundary lines of word and world” (194).
  5. Here, I depart from Rabaté, who writes that “Beckett leads us to a new ‘bathos mathos’: one learns after one has gone *both* to the heights *and* to the depths of anything” (712). It is certainly not clear that Beckett's bathos leads to learning (and Rabaté does not
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perhaps, for compassion and endurance.<sup>6</sup> But aesthetically, the “miracle” is just how inexhaustibly fruitful this bathos, by virtue of the “pure force of the imagination” (Murphy 197, 207), can be in Beckett’s hands.

In Beckett, a relation (in some form) between humanism, the question of the human as such (or of what Badiou calls “the generic existence of humanity” [4]), and aesthetics, with the question of its (in)capacity to educate and ennoble, can be established through Kant’s third Critique—as well as by the dual sense of the term “aesthetics,” which, as we shall see, can refer both to the science of the sensible and the critical reflection on the nature of art, beauty and taste. In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant writes that “*Beauty* is the form of the *purposiveness* of an object, so far as this is perceived in it *without any representation of a purpose*” (73). What this “purposiveness without purpose” means is that a reflective judgment of taste, one made in the absence of any determinate law or standard and based on the apprehension of a beautiful object (in nature), results in the sense that the world has a teleology or transcendent purpose. That is, an aesthetic judgment requires “*subjective universal validity*” (49), as there is “a necessary assent of *all* to a judgment which is regarded as the example of a universal rule that we cannot state” (74). Concluding the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” Kant reiterates these points, while arguing that the aesthetic experience of the beautiful harmonizes the faculties of understanding and imagination, providing an experience of freedom within the finite, physical world:

Hence it is a conformity to law without a law; and a subjective agreement of the imagination and understanding—without such an objective agreement as there is when the representation is referred to a definite concept of an object—can subsist along with the free conformity to law of the understanding (which is also called purposiveness without purpose) and with the peculiar feature of a judgment of taste. (78)

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elaborate), and it seems incorrect to say that we go to the heights of anything in Beckett’s work.

6. Bjørn K. Myskja argues that *Molloy*, due to “its systematic negation of the meaning of the text” and its refusal to give “the reader a coherent meaning” (1), gives rise to a Kantian judgment of the sublime. And “the aesthetic experience of the sublime” for the novel’s reader, he continues, “may contribute to moral conversion and to the cultivation of character” (2).
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For Kant, then, a judgment is aesthetic “because its determining ground is not a concept, but the feeling (of internal sense) of that harmony in the play of the mental powers, so far as it can be felt in sensation” (65). That is, in the play of imagination and understanding, we have the sensation of mental unison, a feeling similar to cognition, even as the experience does not attain the level of conceptual knowledge.

At first glance, nothing could be more incongruous than to speak of Beckett's art in terms of the beautiful and the harmonious “play of the mental powers,” with all its disturbing descents into ignorance, impotence and human infirmity—not to mention the aggravating repetitions that severely try the patience of any reader or spectator. And, indeed, Beckett's aesthetics, and the manner in which it reshapes or retrains our perception and sensibility, seems to be based in the violence of the encounter, the inevitable and often overwhelming, experience being one of disharmony and discord.<sup>7</sup> Be that as it may, even this confrontational aesthetic, if only negatively, retains a relation between art and knowledge, while instantiating the failures of knowing through art, as that art relentlessly thinks through the question of the human in this inscrutable world in which we find ourselves embedded and forced to mean. The words, the spectacles, are meant to provoke; and though contemplate we must, this contemplation is anything but harmonious or disinterested, as Kant insists the aesthetic judgment must be: “*Taste* is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction” (*Critique* 45). Instead, the aesthetic object confronts and disturbs us, not infrequently provoking laughter, making a judgment of universal assent virtually impossible.<sup>8</sup> A “taste” for Beckett is equally problematic, as his art self-consciously refuses to yield conventional aesthetic satisfaction and, in many instances, directly assaults any sense of “good taste.” In *Texts for Nothing*, this is enacted through the writing voice that, forever estranged from the words it speaks and which

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7. While Myskja might see this as the experience of the sublime, I would argue that Beckettian disharmony and discord does not—at least not in most cases—“result[] in a feeling simultaneously positive and negative” (Myskja 52). That is, the violent encounter between reader/spectator and aesthetic object generally overwhelms, without bringing about a compensatory “pleasure,” as in Kant's description of the sublime: “[the pleasure] is produced by the feeling of a momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them” (*Critique* 83).

8. Here, I also disagree with Myskja, who insists upon the “disinterested” nature and “subjective universal validity” of aesthetic judgments (of the sublime) in *Molloy*.

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speak it, figures its language as “wordshit” (137):

No, there is utterance, somewhere someone is uttering. Inanities, agreed, but is that enough, to make sense? I see what it is, the head has fallen behind, all the rest has gone on alone, all alone on its old prowls, slobbering its shit and lapping it back off the lips like in the days when it fancied itself. But the heart’s not in it any more, nor is the appetite what it was. (141)

This painstaking effort, this “courage to break with correspondence itself” (Badiou 115),<sup>9</sup> which unerringly fails, does more than ruin the “appetite.” It is also play, seriously playful writing, which, in fruitlessly attempting to exhaust itself, gives rise to vicissitudes of laughter. And this play, I shall argue below, is fundamental to the question of the aesthetic and the question of the human in Beckett. For him, art and the human condition are both constituted by play—at once, serious and laughable, painful and dignified, poignant and deadly—play that is inescapable in a universe of “finality without end” (*Molloy* 111),<sup>10</sup> one in which the narrators, writing voices and actors compulsively try and fail to bring a (meaningful) end to their worlds.

### III. Pensum, Play, Relation

problem of training and concurrently little by little solution  
and application of same and concurrently moral plane bud  
and bloom of relations proper but first some remarks two  
or three we’ll see

—Beckett, *How It Is* (57)

The unpunctuated syntax of *How It Is*, with parataxis supplanting “proper” grammatical relation, obscures distinctions between subject and predicate, those

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9. Badiou, here, emphasizes the great effort and discipline maintained by Beckett in order to fail: “But the whole problem is that this failure of prose is by no means given. It is an effort and an ascesis, because the words themselves ring clear” (115).

10. Beckett, who wrote the majority of his prose and drama in French before self-translating them into English, uses the phrase “finalité sans fin” in the French text of *Molloy*.

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“lawful” elements which normally structure meaning in language.<sup>11</sup> Willfully disregarding such grammatical convention, the text also seems to enact Beckett’s unachievable desire to create “an expression outside the system of relations which has, until now, been held to be indispensable to whoever doesn’t know how to limit himself to his own navel” (Beckett, “Letter to Georges Duthuit” 20). The possibility of “repudiat[ing] relation in all its forms,” which Beckett locates in the paintings of the Dutchman Bram van Velde, involves undoing the traditional aesthetic relation between the artist and the artistic object to be represented, refusing “relation full stop, the state of being in front of” (19). While, for Beckett, such attempts necessarily lead to failure, we can suggest how this “*gran rifiuto*” (19), this “great refusal” receives literary instantiation in *How It Is*. While the “problem of training,” “solution and application of same” and “moral plane” may exist “concurrently,” there is no basis for concluding that they intersect or have any necessary relation to each other—they are, at one level, merely connected paratactically, by the conjunction “and.” The “bud and bloom” provides a figure for both the incipient and realized, but to *what* this figure is meant to relate remains indeterminate. Nevertheless, much as *Molloy*’s Moran, in his ambiguous search for Molloy, states: “For the falsity of the terms does not necessarily imply that of the relation, so far as I know” (111), there is still relation, in some manner, even if one of the terms is fictitious. On the other hand, while the adjacency of the “moral plane” and “relations” may be pure contingency, in recognizing Beckett’s compulsion for littering his works with the *disjecta membra*<sup>12</sup> of Western thought, we are pointed, if negatively, toward the ways in which morality and beauty, freedom and aesthetic play, have been coupled by figures such as Kant and Friedrich Schiller.<sup>13</sup> The future tense of “we’ll see,” the only proper subject-verb combination in the passage, thus opens an indefinite interval, the singularly Beckettian “finality without end,” in which the immanent sense of a conclusive end is counterbalanced by the non-arrival of that end (in the dual sense of conclusion and aim or purpose). As such, “some remarks” will be made in the indeterminate interval, the ironic tenor of this aesthetic education congealing due to the fact that the

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11. Badiou describes the “radical” invention of *How It Is* as an “asyntactic continuum” (xxxvi).

12. “*Disjecta membra*” means “scattered limbs” in Latin.

13. Myskja, as noted above, continues this trend, linking the reader’s experience of the sublime in *Molloy* with the cultivation of moral feelings.

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“training,” amidst the “warmth of primeval mud impenetrable dark” (Beckett, *How It Is* 11), will not involve the visual, that privileged mode of apprehending the beautiful (or sublime). Instead, the education of the other, “Pim,” by the “I” is to be achieved through the repetitious application of “sadism pure and simple no since I may not cry” (63).<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, we may conceivably take Beckett to be playing with the two senses of the term “aesthetics,” which, as Gilles Deleuze notes, is the vexed legacy of Kant: “Aesthetics suffers from a wrenching duality. On the one hand, it designates the theory of sensibility as the form of possible experience; on the other hand, it designates the theory of art as the reflection of real experience” (260). That is, in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, aesthetics is used in reference to his theory of the beautiful, while in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, the term refers to his theory of sensibility, in which space and time are constitutive of experience. In *How It Is*, then, there is relation, but there is no harmonization that would yield the experience of beauty; in its place, the “I,” from within the mess, establishes a relation with Pim through brute force, imposing, so to speak, a science of the sensible upon him. And this “science of affliction,” to borrow a phrase from Beckett’s *Proust* (513), is also the basis of communication. When the “I” puts his nails into Pim’s armpit, the latter cries or sings. The other “cues” are a thump on the skull, jab in the arse, and bang on the kidney: “thump on skull silence brief rest jab in arse unintelligible murmur bang on kidney signifying louder once and for all cry thump on skull silence brief rest” (Beckett, *How It Is* 68). From the depths of human cruelty, what this may suggest about being human is that relation persists; but in modern life, as in modern art,<sup>15</sup> relation leads not to harmonization, but to discord and disunion, and it certainly does not signal a purposeful or teleological meaning for the world.

The coercive and material “pedagogy” of *How It Is*, in which the need to make some remarks is also punishment, enacts several crucial elements of Beckett’s singular and revisionary aesthetic: the indefinite interval “from the

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14. In Badiou’s reading of *How It Is*, the event of the “pure encounter” opens the possibility of love between the “Two” (27–36).

15. Murphy argues that Beckett, specifically in *Watt*, uses “Kantian distinctions and boundaries between the noumenal and the phenomenal” (202) in order to critique the modernist aesthetics of Joyce, particularly the latter’s notion of the “epiphany.” While this is an intriguing claim, the question of Beckett’s critiques of modernist aesthetics lies beyond the scope of this paper.

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spermarium to the crematorium” (Beckett, *Murphy* 78), the pensum,<sup>16</sup> or life sentence, to fill that interval with play (or habit-play)—“so much toil and play” (Beckett, *Texts for Nothing* 104)—and the unachievable “duty to represent what cannot be represented” (Rabaté 716). This last feature, the impossible obligation, is most famously articulated in Beckett's *Three Dialogues*: “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” (556). The lessons of *How It Is*, it is fair to say, do not illuminate, elevate or liberate—Pim's “face sinks in the mud his cries cease end of first lesson” (62); and as the novel, with the dense materiality of its words, grinds the reader's face, so to speak, into the muck, she may very well turn away, “AP-PALLED” (Beckett, *Godot* 4), unable to make any determination of what it is (supposed to be) about. But much as he said to Georges Duthuit: “I can not write *about*” (Beckett, “Letter to Georges Duthuit” 20), Beckett's strange novel, even as it fails to completely escape “the plane of the feasible” (*Three Dialogues* 556)—the traditional realm of art, where the artist represents something from the external world—concretely resists the longstanding assumption that art has to be *about*, has to represent, *something*, much as he wrote in his defense of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*:

Here form is content, content is form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. 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 writing is not about something; it is that something itself. (Beckett, “Dante” 503)

Unwilling to say about, while never fully able not to say about, Beckett's novel strives, while inevitably failing, to express how it is.

Beckett's reflexive turn away from beauty as the privileged aesthetic experience and proper artistic aim,<sup>17</sup> as we have seen, gives way to the unsettling, painful, and often violent encounter, whether this be between the artist and

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16. In Beckett, the Latin word “pensum” refers to the inescapable “task,” “duty” or “punishment” of living.

17. While I disagree with Badiou's assertion that Beckett remained a “servant of beauty” (42), I can appreciate “the beauty of the prose” (114), which, he writes, “surges forth when we understand that the path of words goes counter to the demand of thought” (115). The playwright Harold Pinter also extolled Beckett's “beauty”: “He brings forth a body of beauty. His work is beautiful” (qtd. in Ben-Zvi 682).

his “object,” the character or voice and its other, or the reader/spectator and the work of art. At the same time, this confrontational aesthetic is inflected by pervasive doubts about the nature and value of human freedom, as well as deep pessimism concerning the powers of reason. In *Murphy*, the narrator speaks of “[t]he freedom of indifference, the indifference of freedom, the will dust in the dust of its object, the act a handful of sand let fall” (105). And, in an interview with Michael Haerdter, Beckett expressed his utter bewilderment at the primacy bestowed upon reason by European philosophy:

The crisis started with the end of the seventeenth century, after Galileo. The eighteenth century has been called the century of reason, *le siècle de la raison*. I’ve never understood that: they’re all mad, *ils sont tous fous, ils déraisonnent!* They give reason a responsibility which it simply can’t bear, it’s too weak. The Encyclopedists wanted to know everything . . . But that direct relation between the self and—as the Italians say—*lo scibile*, the knowable, was already broken. (qtd. in McMillan and Fehsenfeld 231)

This unequivocal critique of the power of human reason, of the “ruptured” (Murphy 197) relation between the “I” and what can be known, also suffuses Beckett’s meticulous revision of the Schillerian aesthetic education. For Schiller, the experience of beauty is said to mediate the human faculties of reason and sensibility, ultimately leading to the formation of morally sound individuals.

In the *Aesthetic Education*, Schiller unabashedly proclaims beauty as the vehicle of human liberation, harmonizing the material and formal, finite and infinite, inclination and duty. Because human nature, for him, “is both sensuous and rational,” and the aesthetic experience involves the uniquely human, temporary melding of these faculties, “Beauty must be exhibited as a necessary condition of humanity” (60). Furthermore, because beauty elevates the mind and soul, transcending the human faculties taken independently, the aesthetic experience, for its duration, emancipates us from the finitude of the material world; and, in fact, freedom, like space and time, is constitutive of the complex admixture that is human nature: “we have in the first place the idea of absolute being grounded in itself, that is to say of *freedom*” (61). Schiller thus sees the individual as driven by two distinct forces: a sensuous impulse and a formal impulse. The former, which proceeds “from the physical existence of Man or from his sensuous nature” (64) is limited by human finitude; the latter, which is the faculty by which moral judgments are made, “proceeds from Man’s

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absolute existence or from his rational nature, and strives to set him at liberty, to bring harmony into the diversity of his manifestation, and to maintain his person throughout every change of circumstance" (65–66). But "without a third fundamental impulse, which should reconcile these two" (67), "Man remains for ever divided" (68), with the sensuous subordinated to the formal (or rational). As such, Schiller identifies the play impulse, which combines the sensuous and formal: "this play impulse would aim at the extinction of time *in time* and the reconciliation of becoming with absolute being, of variation with identity" (74). Schiller sums up this reconciliation as follows:

The object of the sense impulse, expressed in a general concept, may be called *life* in the widest sense of the word; a concept which expresses all material being and all that is immediately present in the senses. The object of the form impulse, expressed generally, may be called *shape*, both in the figurative and in the literal sense; a concept which includes all formal qualities of things and all their relations to the intellectual faculties. The object of the play impulse, conceived in a general notion, can therefore be called *living shape*, a concept which serves to denote all aesthetic qualities of phenomena and—in a word—what we call *Beauty* in the widest sense of the term. (76)

Beauty, then, ennobles the soul by unifying the individual's disparate faculties, reconciling his nature that is simultaneously finite and infinite. And this "living shape," which is both activated and apprehended in the aesthetic experience, Schiller reiterates, is precisely that which makes us fully human: "For, to declare it once and for all, Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*" (80).

Clearly, as Paul Stewart argues, Beckett's works evince an utter mistrust of the capacity of art or the aesthetic experience to "transcend[] the gross materiality of the world as experienced in time" or "compensate for the suffering of continuing life" (149). And if, for example, we consider Schiller's assertion that the play impulse has the capacity to reconcile "becoming with absolute being" and "variation with identity," we quickly find, in place of harmonization, an aggravating suspension or accented discord between irreducible terms: "What variety and at the same time what monotony, how varied it is and at the same time how, what's the word, how monotonous. What agitation and at the same time what calm, what vicissitudes within what changelessness" (Beckett, *Texts*

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for *Nothing* 137). Nevertheless, Beckett, in his singular manner, does take the impulse to play very seriously; his works strongly suggest, with no small measure of mordancy, that man is most human when he plays, that play, as the Beckettian condition, might very well be the human condition.

This play assumes multiple guises: there is the play to be performed, even a play entitled *Play*, in which a man, confined in a giant urn, asks: “All this, when will all this have been ... just play?” (Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* 153). There is the (meaningless) play with words, the play of making worlds from words, and the subsequent play of attempting to escape from them, as we see in *Texts for Nothing*:

See what’s happening here, where there’s no one, where nothing happens, get something to happen here, someone to be here, then put an end to it, have silence, get into silence, or another sound, a sound of other voices than those of life and death, of lives and deaths everyone’s but mine, get into my story in order to get out of it, no, that’s all meaningless. (112)

As Stewart convincingly shows, situating Beckett’s *Malone Dies* in relation to Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education*, there are, for Malone, “two possible poles: play or earnestness” (Stewart 151). This comes directly from Schiller, who states that “aesthetic play” means a flight into “the lofty freedom of the Beautiful above the fetters of every purposed end,” away “[f]rom the sanction of need,” or “*physical seriousness*” and “*physical play*” (Schiller 133)—which Beckett terms “earnestness.” In the second novel of Beckett’s trilogy, Malone, confined in his terminal state to a hospital bed, oscillates between the earnestness of describing his immediate sensible world, which is but a room with a diminishing inventory of sundry items, and the play of inventing stories, which never reaches any purposeful end:

What am I doing now, I wonder, losing time or gaining it? I have also decided to remind myself briefly of my present state before embarking on my stories. I think this is a mistake. It is a weakness. But I shall indulge in it. I shall play with all the more ardour afterwards. And it will be a pendant to the inventory. Aesthetics are therefore on my side, at least a certain kind of aesthetics. For I shall have to become earnest again to be able to speak of my possessions. (Beckett, *Malone Dies* 182)

Predictably, Malone's play does not lead to freedom; he remains fettered by the world's materiality, without finding any consolation in art. But more than this, it is almost as if play ironically seeks to surpass itself in *Malone Dies*, as the movement between the poles of earnestness and play ultimately becomes play itself, one that ends indeterminately, midsentence, without revealing any point or purpose: "never anything / there / any more" (288). Lastly, and most fundamental in Beckett, there is the play engendered by the sheer inescapability of doing something, especially when there is "[n]othing to be done" (Beckett, *Godot 2*), in a universe in which waiting takes on a "finality without end."

In the early monograph *Proust*, Beckett explicitly inverts Schiller's aesthetics, equating suffering with play: "The suffering of being: that is, the free play of every faculty" (516). Free play, he continues, results from the suspension of habit, and this state of suffering is intrinsically aesthetic: "its cruelties and enchantments are the cruelties and enchantments of reality" (517):

The fundamental duty of Habit, about which it describes the futile and stupefying arabesques of its supererogations, consists in a perpetual adjustment and readjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its worlds. Suffering represents the omission of that duty, whether through negligence or inefficiency, and boredom its adequate performance. The pendulum oscillates between these two terms: *Suffering*—that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience, and *Boredom*—with its host of top-hatted and hygienic ministers, Boredom that must be considered as the most tolerable because the most durable of human evils. (Beckett, *Proust* 520)

Habit in much of Beckett tends to be, as Ulrika Maude writes, "something that impedes knowledge and distracts us from experience" (820); but play, as the other term in the relation, also becomes reflexive and painful habit, such that it both distracts the mind from the distressing reality that is and ultimately renders its force more potent. We have already seen an example of this play-habit in *Texts for Nothing*: "what vicissitudes within what changelessness" (137). In a work like *Godot*, the play-habit assumes a more tactile dimension, as the actors, confined to their space, voice their "canter" (72)—the verbal riposte a habitual form of play that serves to pass the time and forget, momentarily, the potential endlessness of their waiting:

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Vladimir: When you seek you hear.  
Estragon: You do.  
Vladimir: That prevents you from finding.  
Estragon: It does.  
Vladimir: That prevents you from thinking.  
Estragon: You think all the same.  
Vladimir: No no, impossible.  
Estragon: That's the idea, let's contradict each other.  
Vladimir: Impossible.  
Estragon: You think so?  
Vladimir: We're in no danger of ever thinking any more.  
Estragon: Then what are we complaining about?  
Vladimir: Thinking is not the worst.  
Estragon: Perhaps not. But at least there's that.  
Vladimir: That what?  
Estragon: That's the idea, let's ask each other questions. (Beckett, *Godot* 70–71)

The playful banter, which alleviates, without by any means curing, the dreadful pensum of thought—“What is terrible is to *have* thought” (71)—habitually fills the intervals between the free play of thought and the portal it opens on the real: “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!” (43). And confronted with such a world, in which the human has been consigned to ignorance and confusion, with no clear end in sight, and no discernible way of getting there, our response is anything but disinterested. Our habitual modes of apprehending (the aesthetic object) are disrupted, and our faculties are thrown into a free play which cannot be reconciled or eluded. While I wouldn't go so far as to say that this peculiar and poignant play elevates or emancipates, it unflinchingly confirms our mortal, finite condition, while, at its most exquisite, activating an irrepressible impulse to go on.<sup>18</sup>

As with most things in Beckett, this (modestly) affirmative aspect of play is counterbalanced by an unrelenting, sardonic disposition; and nowhere is this more evident than in his treatment of the aesthetic relation between free play and beauty. Kant insists that “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good”

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18. While I am insisting upon an unmistakably affirmative quality to Beckett's writing, I do take issue with Badiou's claim that Beckett's writing is purely affirmative (41).

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(*Critique* 198), and that through the beautiful, “the mind is made conscious of a certain ennoblement and elevation above mere sensibility to pleasure received through sense, and the worth of others is estimated in accordance with a like maxim of their judgment” (199). In Beckett, on the other hand, there is no such “common sense” in the aesthetic judgment; indeed, beauty, in its rare evocations, is either related to the *inhuman*, as we see in *Molloy*, or sardonically consigned, as *Endgame* shows, to the rubbish heap of Occidental culture, with all its corny, long-discredited myths of rebirth:

He said to me, said Gaber, Gaber, he said, life is a thing of beauty, Gaber, and a joy for ever. He brought his face nearer mine. A joy for ever, he said, a thing of beauty, Moran, and a joy for ever. He smiled. I closed my eyes. Smiles are all very nice in their own way, very heartening, but at a reasonable distance. I said, Do you think he meant human life? I listened. Perhaps he didn't mean human life, I said. (*Molloy* 165)

HAMM: I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. . . . I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! (*Pause.*) He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. (*Endgame* 44)

In these passages, we see at least two non-relations established: in the first, between the human and the beautiful; in the second, between the beautiful and the teleological—that is, the madman who perceives the end of the world sees no forms of loveliness, only ashes. Reflective of these non-relations is Beckett's inversion, in the *Whoroscope* notebook, of Kant's “purposiveness without purpose,” in which, as mentioned above, an aesthetic judgment leads us to presume that the world has a teleology, even if we cannot discern what it might be. In its stead, Beckett posits a “purpose without purposiveness,” which, rather than indicating some transcendent purpose in our sensible world, results in a divorce between form and purpose, in “incidents that is to say of great formal brilliance and indeterminate purport” (Beckett, *Watt* 74). John Pilling further clarifies the significance of this “purpose without purposiveness”: “This was Beckett's way of ‘organizing’ a revolt of means against ends, without denying that there would have to be some kind of conclusion” (70). That is, “there is

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an ‘end,’ in one sense, but no ‘end’ (in the sense of ‘purpose’) because there is no ‘purposiveness,’ and no ‘means’ available to service it anyway” (70). The “revolt” against Kantian “purposiveness,” in the final analysis, seems inveterate in Beckett’s art, to the extent that his “formal brilliance” incessantly resists any definite purpose or proper end; his artworks, ever-faithful to “the tireless desire to think” (Badiou 77), continue to play, as a means without an end. As Pilling notes, Beckett never refuted the fact that there would be a conclusion. The point, perhaps, is that his art challenges us to dwell in the indefinite, to have the courage to take on the virtually inexhaustible play that comes with being properly and finitely human.

In one regard, Beckettian play is characterized by “gross materiality,” the enduring and aching play of the “decrepit, decaying, disgusting” body that his art “refuses to beautify, disguise, deny, or turn into metaphors or symbols that hide it or refine it out of existence” (Ben-Zvi 682). Here, we might think of Molloy’s grotesque odyssey back to his mother’s home, with all its unsavory, fleshy humor: the “bits of newspaper to wipe myself” thrust under the policeman’s nose out of panic and confusion; arithmetical calculations on flatulence (“Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself”); and his experience of love “in the rubbish dump,” where “I was bent double over a heap of much, in the hopes of finding something to disgust me for ever with eating” (Beckett, *Molloy* 20, 30, 57). Such play is certainly not spiritual, it does not, as Schiller would have it, “transport[] our spirit” and leave us “wholly indifferent” (101); what it does, and quite frequently, is make us laugh, however darkly. And this kind of laughter in Beckett, far from revealing a harmony between mind and world, sensible and supersensible, makes us, as Simon Critchley writes, wholly aware of our human finitude and its elusive and paradoxical nature:

Laughter is an acknowledgment of finitude, precisely not a manic affirmation of finitude in the solitary, neurotic laughter of the mountain tops [...], but as an affirmation that finitude cannot be affirmed because it cannot be grasped. [...] Laughter returns us to the limited condition of our finitude, the shabby and degenerate state of our upper and lower bodily strata, and it is here that the comic allows the window to fly open onto our tragic condition. (159)

Critchley makes a number of suggestive comments about Beckettian laughter,

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claiming, for instance, that it serves as a site of “resistance to the alleged total administration of society” (159), but most pertinent to this inquiry is the way in which this aesthetic experience returns us to our indefinite, finite state, rather than liberating us from it. Transforming the body into “laughing matter,” to borrow Linda Ben-Zvi’s phrase, can thus be framed as a simultaneous submission to and revolt against our mortal, ignorant condition; it is often distressing, but it is playfully humane, making our condition a little more bearable (696). Contra Schiller, Beckett’s aesthetic takes us back to the material and sensible, revealing, instead of freedom, the indefinite and inexhaustible.

At the same time, there is the play in Beckett whose laughter is “the mirthless laugh,” “the dianoetic laugh,” “the *risus pursus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh,” “the laugh that laughs ... at that which is unhappy” (Beckett, *Watt* 48). And this seems to be the case for *Endgame*, where the legless Nell, confined to her ashbin, asks, “Why this farce, day after day?” (14), and later says, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. But—” (18). In spite of the impotent “but,” with all the “vicissitudes of the arts in the science of affliction” (Blau, “The Commodius Vicus” 22), *Endgame* shows through a persistence, both cruel and poignant, that play goes on:

CLOV: (*imploringly*) Let’s stop playing!

HAMM: Never! (*Pause.*) Put me in my coffin.

CLOV: There are no more coffins.

HAMM: Then let it end! (*Clov goes toward ladder.*) With a bang! (77)

With neither the gimpy Clov nor the blind Hamm capable of achieving a whimper or bang, play itself becomes the part-deadening, part-enlivening pensum, the life sentence: “Hamm *is* punished, or *acts out* a punishment,” stresses Blau, in this, Beckett’s “most ‘clawing’ or punishing play, all the more severe from thinking too much” (*Sails* 126). “Me—(*he yawns*)—to play” (Beckett, *Endgame* 2), Hamm’s ungrammatical first words, enforce an insuperable split between the self-objectified “me” and the infinitive to be performed, before the eyes of the audience. That is, this “me” disrupts the long-entrenched relation between spectator and aesthetic object; reflexively and unrelentingly, the gaze is turned back on us, and what is being played (“it” or “me”) “knows,” so to speak, that it is, against all wishes to the contrary, playing, stretching our capacity to endure it and know what to think (about it): “Use your head, can’t you, use your head, you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!”

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(68). This recursive gesture is perhaps most conspicuous when Clov turns the telescope on the audience and says: “I see ... a multitude ... in transports ... of joy. (*Pause.*) That’s what I call a magnifier” (29). What is seemingly “magnified” here, through the mirthless humor, is *Endgame*’s refusal, or failure, to play its prescribed part in the aesthetic relation, to “properly” represent or mean for the audience: “We’re not beginning to ... to ... mean something?” “Mean something! You and I, mean something! (*Brief laugh.*) Ah that’s a good one!” (32–33). As its title might suggest, *Endgame* is a play obsessed with ending all these cruel games, with bringing an end to the suffering of play. But as long as there is meaning—even if it is not meaningful—and *Endgame*, if nothing else, shows that there is far too much meaning, the play will not stop. Cavell is quite insightful in this regard: “suffering has to stop being *used*, has to stop *meaning* anything, and become the simple fact of life. Where it is a game, it is a losing game; where existence is interpreted, sheltered, it is lost” (151). As with the endgame of chess, this will always be a losing game—for us, for them, for the artist. Nevertheless, as Beckett said approvingly of van Velde, “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail”; *Endgame*’s “fidelity to failure” (Beckett, *Three Dialogues* 563), then, is enacted in the refusal to mean and the inability not to mean. With “failure” substituted for the object or “representee” (563) in the aesthetic relation, the play impulse renders form and matter scarcely distinguishable, and, in frequently hurting the head, the experience, anything but disinterested, achieves an almost sublime grandeur.

#### IV. Conclusion

In his conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Walter Pater writes that “we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve,” and the only hope for redemption is to be found in the aesthetic experience, “in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (ch. 10). While, as we have seen, Beckett’s aesthetic provides scant exaltation and even less liberation from our finitude, the notion of the “indefinite reprieve” is constitutive of his literary worlds, with play, it would seem, the “pensum” for having been birthed into them. And, as we see in *Molloy* and *The Unnamable*, the pensum to speak oneself involves an aggravating, exhausting, and wholly indeterminate sentence:

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Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept. To hell with it anyway. (Beckett, *Molloy* 32)

I spoke, I must have spoken, of a lesson, it was a pensum I should have said, I confused pensum with lesson. Yes, I have a pensum to discharge, before I can be free, free to dribble, free to speak no more, listen no more, and I've forgotten what it is. There at last is a fair picture of my situation. I was given a pensum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for having been born perhaps, or for no particular reason, because they dislike me, and I've forgotten what it is. [...] Strange notion in any case, and eminently open to suspicion, that of a task to be performed, before one can be at rest. Strange task, which consists in speaking of oneself. Strange hope, turned towards silence and peace." (Beckett, *The Unnamable* 310–11)

With "Nothing to be done" (Beckett, *Godot* 2) about any of *that*—the indefinite pensum of having been born—there is, as Beckett affirms through myriad iterations, nothing to do but go "On!" (51). And, as Badiou succinctly puts it, "The *on* cannot be effaced" (97).

It is here, I would like to conclude, that Beckett's aesthetics and Beckett's humanism converge. The questions will continue; the answers will not be forthcoming. The world will remain opaque, we shall expire, and the proper ends of humankind will not be revealed. But through all the suffering and immense confusion, the near-exhaustion and failure, Beckett's uncompromising art discloses an appallingly resilient human will. This poignancy is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the final prose piece, "Stirrings Still," where Beckett, approaching his own conclusion, wrote: "So on unknowing and no end in sight" (263).

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## Abstract

While Beckett, with his aesthetics of ignorance and impotence, has often been claimed as an antihumanist, his abiding artistic concern remained the elusive question of the human and its ends or purposes. Admittedly, this humanism is “cruelly humane,” as it compulsively excavates the depths of human abjection, suffering and infirmity; but even as the human remains unknowable in Beckett, the impetus to “go on” with the endeavor is appallingly resilient and affecting—and, artistically, it is remarkably fruitful. What emerges from this inexhaustible drive for ends and purposes, in a world of “finality without end” or “purpose without purposiveness,” is a kind of play, which ranges from the laughable and pitiful to the excruciating and poignant. And it is precisely in this play, I argue, that Beckettian humanism and Beckettian aesthetics converge. Revising the aesthetic tradition of Kant and Schiller, his work rejects the beautiful, and its putative harmonization of the mental faculties, as the privileged and proper domain of art; instead, it activates a confrontational aesthetic, the experience of which is predominantly one of discord and discomfort. Through its play, this aesthetic takes us back to our human finitude, revealing, in place of freedom and transcendence, the indefinite and grimly humorous. For Beckett, then, play seems to be constitutive of both the art and the human, and we are never more human than when we play. The ends and meaning will remain indefinite, but such play may have the capacity to revitalize the imagination and encourage us to go on, wherever that may be.

**Keywords:** Beckett, aesthetics, humanism, play, Kant and Schiller

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