Schopenhauer and Beckett: Towards a Literature of the Un(re)presentable*

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Summary

The present article explores the relationship between Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will, Beckett's literary art (particularly drama) and the notion of the un(re)presentable or the sublime as reformulated by Lyotard. An attempt is made to show that Beckett's work, which has been called postmodern, may be read as an exemplification of what Lyotard terms the modern or nostalgic sublime, recognizable by its allusion to unrepresentable "missing contents". It is further argued at length that the "missing contents" in this case are the Schopenhauerian will, understood to be the unrepresentable, irrational, abysmal ground of being, and that an analysis of some of Beckett's work reveals a clear similarity between its "musical structure" and that of the metaphysical notion of the will.

Opsomming

Die huidige artikel ondersoek die verband tussen Schopenhauer se filosofie van die wil, Beckett se literêre kuns (veral drama) en die begrip van die onvoorstelbare of die sublieme soos geherformuleer deur Lyotard. Daar word gepoog om aan te toon dat Beckett se werk, wat al as postmodern gesien is, verstaan kan word as die beliggaming van wat Lyotard die moderne of nostalgiese sublieme noem, wat weer herkenbaar is aan die suggestie van 'n onvoorstelbare, "afwesige inhoud". Daar word verder geargumenteer dat die "afwesige inhoud" in hierdie geval die Schopenhaueriaanse wil is, in die sin van die onvoorstelbare, irrasionele, afgrondelike grond van syn, en dat 'n analise van Beckett se werk 'n duidelike ooreenkoms tussen die "musikale struktuur" daarvan en dié van die metafisiese begrip van die wil na vore bring.

> We cannot know and we cannot be known (Beckett on Proust)

What would a literature be like which explores - or accepts its vocation as consisting in the exploration of - that which cannot be (re)presented? It should not be difficult to recognize in this formulation an allusion to what is commonly referred to as "the sublime" in aesthetics, from Burke and Kant in the eighteenth to Lyotard in the twentieth century. The latter (1984: 81) makes the (by now familiar) distinction between modern and postmodern aesthetics by pointing to two different varieties of the sublime:

nostalgic and innovative. The nostalgia of a modern aesthetic of the sublime (and by implication of "modern" art and literature) manifests itself, according to Lyotard, as "missing contents", while the innovativeness of a postmodern aesthetic of the sublime may be detected in its interminable search for "new presentations". Both kinds of aesthetic face the task of presenting the "unpresentable", albeit in different ways. In the case of the modern, "the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" despite the "missing contents", while the "postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms" (Lyotard 1984: 81).

As representatives of the modern and the postmodern aesthetic (respectively) in literature, Lyotard cites the work of Proust and of Joyce. Proust would be modern, because he "calls forth the unpresentable by means of a language unaltered in its syntax and vocabulary". Joyce, on the other hand, "allows the unpresentable to become perceptible in his writing itself, in the signifier" (Lyotard 1984: 80). In short, at the level of narrative and stylistic form, and even down to the level of the lexical signifier, Joyce, as representative of a postmodern aesthetic of the sublime, destabilizes the very means to meaning which, in Proust (as representative of a modern aesthetic of the sublime) still remains relatively stable. What makes Proust's work modern in this sense is, one should remind oneself, the fact that something, some "content", drops out of the otherwise stable and coherent formal structure - something is alluded to as being conceivable yet un(re)presentable, that is, as being sublime. (This formulation of the sublime succinctly captures Kant's (1969: 98-103) understanding of the phenomenon.)

With the preceding in mind, and turning to the main purpose of this essay, I would like to explore the question regarding Samuel Beckett's literary art, namely, whether or not it may be understood in terms of Lyotard's characterization of the modern and the postmodern aesthetics of the sublime. The answer seems to me to be that Beckett's literary art is an art of the modern, of the nostalgic sublime, which alludes to the unpresentable as "missing contents". And I would like to show, further, that this necessarily omitted content can (perhaps: should) be grasped in terms of Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will as the elusive, un(re)presentable ground - "abyss" or "abysmal ground" would be more appropriate - of being. This requires a fairly lengthy consideration of Schopenhauer's philosophy, before turning to Beckett's art in order to show that the inscrutable Schopenhauerian will is indeed what constitutes the "missing contents" in his texts by virtue of its unrepresentable presence, its paradoxical "present absence".

"Breathing is habit", says Samuel Beckett in his early essay on Proust;

> Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals; the world being a projection of the individual's consciousness (an objectivation of the individual's will, Schopenhauer would say) the pact must be continually renewed, the letter of safe-conduct brought up to date.
> (Beckett 1965: 19)

A number of important things strike one about this passage. It moves on various levels, from that of the unreflective automatism of "involuntary" bodily processes (the will unconsciously asserting itself) through the extension of this to the full circumference of life, and eventually to the epistemological-ontological thesis concerning the world having its representational basis in individual consciousness. The Schopenhauerian "deeper truth", added in brackets, furnishes the final level, that of the will, which has to be recognized as being more fundamental than even the seemingly self-sufficient operations of reason. (For the moment I shall ignore the assertion of radical alterity inhabiting the individual, as well as the Husserlian ring of the suggestion that the world's being is renewed from moment to moment.) Although Beckett is here commenting on Proust's novelistic art, the Schopenhauerian tenor of everything he says - not only the explicit parenthetical reference - is too conspicuous to overlook. Not that it is surprising, in view of the already familiar fact of Schopenhauer's influence on both Proust and Beckett (cf. e.g. Pankow 1985: 226).

To be able to answer the earlier question concerning the aesthetic status of Beckett's work, I would, in the first place, like to concentrate on the question of representation in Beckett and Schopenhauer, and its relation to the deeper level of the self which must remain unknowable, at least to others if not to oneself, and on the question of the mode of accessibility of this level, if indeed there is such a mode. For Schopenhauer this "level" (for want of a better word) is that of the *will*, the concept of which does not originate in phenomena or representations, but in the "direct" knowledge that everyone has of the will itself within him- or herself:

> In this consciousness each one knows and at the same time is himself his own individuality according to its nature immediately, without any form, even the form of subject and object, for here knower and known coincide.
> (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 112)

One therefore has the strange situation that the inner knowledge of the will differs radically from all other knowledge, which is representational, and hence that a discussion (first and foremost Schopenhauer's) of the immediate

inner knowledge of the will nevertheless has to proceed along representational, conceptual lines, thus hovering above, and implicating a realm which is "itself" never "touched" conceptually. And yet, despite the apparent futility of conceptual mediation, we do not seem to have any difficulty recognizing the inner operations of (our own) will from its conceptual description. How is this possible? Is the radical otherness of the will, after all, susceptible to the representational categories of reason, whose mode of operation is wholly distinct from that of the former? In fact, *can* one sensibly talk of "knowledge" of or through the *will*, if the very form of subject- and object-polarity, essential to (representational) knowledge (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 3, 25) is absent from the immediate awareness of ourselves as will? In this realm of immediacy, Schopenhauer points out (above), *knowing* and *being* coincide: *being* my own individual will, I *know* it (and myself); *knowing* it, I *am* my will (and self). Paradoxically, however, we cannot (re)present ourselves as such. In aesthetic terms, this is the realm of the sublime.

It seems to follow, therefore, that self-knowledge is possible for Schopenhauer, albeit in a non-epistemic, non-representational, formless, *immediate* "inner" mode. It *also* follows that, because each one of us is privy only to our own inner life of feeling, and to no one else's; we do not *at all* have access to the other's self - unless of course representational, conceptual knowledge provides such access. In what follows I hope to show, not only that essential knowledge (including a scientific psychology) of other selves is impossible in Schopenhauer's terms, but also that, in an important sense, *knowledge* (whether representational or immediate) of one's own distinctive self is equally impossible; further, that Beckett's fiction is an enactment of this scepticism, as well as of Schopenhauer's "aesthetic way" to the overcoming of all mediation and all individuation. In other words, the works of both Beckett and Schopenhauer confront us with the un(re)presentable, that is, the sublime, albeit in different ways. It is in this sense that Beckett's art can be seen as a literature of the (modern) sublime.

But perhaps I should focus more pertinently on the concept of *representation* in Schopenhauer's work first, in order to provide an effective contrast with what he calls (the world as) will. His opening statement in *The World as Will and Representation* declares:

> The world is my representation: this is a truth valid with reference to every living and knowing being, although man alone can bring it into reflective, abstract consciousness. If he really does so, philosophical discernment has dawned on him. It then becomes clear and certain to him that he does not know a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth; that the world around him is there only as representation, in other words, only

> in reference to another thing, namely that which represents, and this is himself.
> (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 3)

We already know, however, that the world has another aspect for Schopenhauer, viz. will - an insight which constitutes a "very serious and grave if not terrible" truth. Moreover, this discovery could not be made

> if the investigator himself were nothing more than the purely knowing subject (a winged cherub without a body). But he himself is rooted in that world; and thus he finds himself in it as an *individual*, in other words, his knowledge, which is the conditional supporter of the whole world [including the body] as representation, is nevertheless given entirely through the medium of a body, and the affections of this body are, as we have shown, the starting-point for the understanding in its perception of this world.
> (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 99)

We come back, therefore, to the body, of which we have a kind of double awareness: firstly, as representation and secondly, as will (pp. 18, 100). In fact, Schopenhauer contends that an act of the will and an action of the body are one and the same thing (p. 100), only given in different ways, viz. directly (as will) and in perception (as representation).

Why this emphasis on the body? The status of the body is in fact crucial here, because knowledge of other individuals, unlike the immediate knowledge of our own (inner) selves, is mediated by our perception of them as embodied individuals in time and space, i.e. as objectivations of the will.

> ... every action of my body is an appearance or phenomenon of an act of will in which my will itself in general and as a whole, and hence my character, ... expresses itself under given motives.
> (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 107)

If we further consider that the *character* of the individual is nothing less than the individually modified will (p. 108), it follows that our knowledge of other selves depends upon our apprehension of (the actions of) their bodies, and hence, that we can never have direct knowledge of their essential selves as will. Moreover, Schopenhauer takes care to point out (and this follows) that we do not even know immediately what another *body* is *in itself* (p. 103), but only as phenomenon or representation.

But if this is the case, how should one understand his remark, that in contrast with our species-knowledge of animals, which enables us to anticipate exactly the individual animal's behaviour, the human individual has to be (i.e. *can* be) studied "by himself", albeit with "the greatest difficulty, if we wish to determine beforehand with some degree of certainty his course

of action"? (Schopenhauer 1969: 131). In short, Schopenhauer does seem to grant that knowledge of others is possible. The answer has to lie in the previously indicated isomorphism between the acts of the will and the actions of the body: they are the "same", yet "given" differently. The bodily actions of an individual may therefore be regarded as *revealing* the person's character, that is, his or her essential self as modification of the will. Yet this knowledge is always indirect, mediated, representational. It may also be noted that the high degree of individual characterization of persons, necessitating close individual scrutiny before any prediction concerning a person's behaviour may be ventured, precludes, for Schopenhauer, the possibility of a scientific psychology, i.e. a rational system of generalizations pertaining to the behaviour of the human species. In this respect, one's character is a *qualitas occulta*, in the same sense as natural forces like gravity or electricity may be called *qualitates occultae* - original "groundless" forces (pp. 130-132; 138-139) which must be *presupposed* by all causal explanation without being causes themselves. Therefore character, being the "immediate phenomenon of the will", is ultimately inexplicable in conceptual, representational terms, although it discloses itself under all life's circumstances.

But what of one's self? Schopenhauer is quoted above to the effect that one has immediate access to one's own inner self. I also pointed out, however, that in a certain sense even this knowledge is denied to us, most obviously in the sense that it transcends the subject-object relationship that, according to Schopenhauer, is essential to knowledge. Less obviously, but more profoundly, it is impossible to know an *essential* self because the self is essentially *will*, albeit an individual modification of the will, an essence which the self shares not only with other selves, but also with all other living beings and even with inanimate entities in nature:

> The thing-in-itself as such, is free from all forms of knowledge, even the most universal, namely that of being object for the subject; in other words, it is something entirely different from the representation. Now if this thing-in-itself ... is the *will*, then, considered as such and apart from its phenomenon, it lies outside time and space, and accordingly knows no plurality, and consequently is *one*.
>
> (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 128)

In other words, it is not subject to the *principium individuationes*, and hence the self *as will* is indivisibly one with all other phenomena of the will with regard to their inner essence. Strictly speaking, therefore, there is no distinctive self in terms of essence. We are thus faced with the paradox that what we are capable of "knowing" representationally, in terms of concepts,

is an individuated self (or selves) which is merely a phenomenon of the unrepresentable will, and therefore not essential.

Does Schopenhauer make room for any way of "knowing" true reality as will, other than immediate inner (non-)self-knowledge? The answer is in the affirmative: art (especially music), or aesthetic experience, affords us such an opportunity, which is truly beyond self-knowledge, and which is not without its paradoxical side either, as will become apparent.

Where does Beckett's fiction figure in all of this? The extent to which Schopenhauer's thought has been assimilated by Beckett in his work is in fact astonishing. This does not only apply to Schopenhauer's aesthetic, but to his philosophy of the unrepresentable will in all its ramifications, the main ones of which have been touched upon in broad outline here. The Schopenhauerian thesis (inherited from Kant but stylized into his own version) of the world being "my representation" echoes in Beckett's essay on Proust and reverberates throughout his fiction - in his trilogy of novels for instance. As McHale (1987: 12) points out, in the second novel, *Malone Dies* (1979), Malone's claim to have been the author of the earlier novel, *Molloy* (1979), focuses the reader's attention sharply on the act of representing or projecting a world (in this case the world[s] of the characters Molloy and Moran). In the third novel, *The Unnamable* (1979), this capacity of projecting world(s) is more powerful and versatile. The Unnamable not only represents or constructs worlds and characters in them, but displays apparently limitless freedom to revise, destroy or reconstruct them. For example, at a certain point, he considers that it is "no doubt time I gave a companion to Malone" (Beckett 1979: 272); at another he decides to call Basil Mahood instead (p. 283; cf. McHale 1987: 12-13).

Moreover, the very title *The Unnamable*, which is also the narrator's (non-)name, is Schopenhauerian insofar as the self remains, in the final analysis, elusive, as demonstrated above in terms of the *will*. The (conceptual) ineffability of the will is further stressed in Beckett's (1979: 273) novel by the fact that, whether the Unnamable invents characters or whether he supposes himself (as he sometimes does) to be a character invented by someone else, he is imprisoned within his own projections or representations - he never manages to penetrate them to reach his own reality or that of his creator, which may in this respect, in the context of the novel, be seen as the Schopenhauerian will. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the very last words of the novel[1] : "... 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" (p. 382).

In other words, what surrounds us in the Schopenhauerian universe implicated by *The Unnamable* is, finally, the silence of the groundless, inscrutable, irrational, blindly self-perpetuating and -objectifying will (Schopen-

hauer 1969 I: 114-115; 117-118; II: 350-357). Or, in aesthetic terms, the novel confronts us with the sublime - not directly, but indirectly, as the "missing contents" which may be suggested, alluded to or hinted at, but which finally eludes all imaginative attempts at (re-)presenting it. This is in accord with Kant's (1969: 98-103) conception of the "mathematically sublime" as that which cannot be adequately "presented" by the imagination. It should be noted that, although Kant refers to overwhelmingly vast natural phenomena as instances which occasion an experience of the sublime, the Schopenhauerian will epitomizes its un(re)presentability.

It is not only in Beckett's novels that Schopenhauer's mark is unmistakable. It is readily detectable in the fabric of his dramas - if they can indeed be called dramas - as well. The "characters" in his plays have the curious ability to undermine the impression that they *are* characters in the conventional sense. Even though they appear "representationally" in time and space on the stage, they resist attempts "to make character traits stick to them", as Goldman (1969: 38) points out.[2] This is quite understandable in Schopenhauerian terms. To the extent that Beckett writes about or depicts the *essence* of existence (p. 36), he brings his audience in "direct" contact with the Schopenhauerian will - "life departicularized", in Goldman's words. This means that a play such as *Endgame* (Beckett 1958), for example, performs a remarkable feat: while apparently proceeding in representational terms - in space and time with recognizable "characters", with a "beginning" and an "end" - the play undermines (or "deconstructs") these in order to function as a metaphor for the Schopenhauerian will, the (modern) sublime, or alternatively, in a "musical" manner. If we keep in mind that music occupies a distinctive position in Schopenhauer's aesthetic, being the *direct* embodiment of the will (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 257) - in contrast to the other arts, which reveal the groundless nature of the will indirectly in the form of an Idea[3] as objectification of the will - it is not difficult to understand the attribution of such musical status to a play like *Endgame*: "... the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts, for these others speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence" (1969 I: 257). Compare Goldman's remark on Beckett's *Endgame*:

> As the language becomes less discursive and more incantatory, a much remarked quality of the play, do we not feel that we are in the presence of a linguistic art form that nevertheless suggests the properties of non-linguistic forms - painting, music?
>
> (Goldman 1969: 38)

Small wonder then that the following excerpt from Hamm's final speech in the play addresses us in a "presentational" (i.e. direct, non-discursive) manner - a term which Goldman (1969: 39) borrows from Suzanne Langer - presenting us with an epiphany of human suffering in strangely lyrical cadences:

> We're coming. A few more squirms like that and I'll call. A little poetry. You prayed - You CRIED for night, it comes - it FALLS: now cry in darkness. You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness. Nicely put, that. And now? Moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended.[4]
>
> (Beckett 1958: 52)

If the description of this speech as "presentational" seems to contradict the interpretation put forward in this article, namely that Beckett's work, in its "enactment" of the Schopenhauerian will as its "missing contents", can be understood as a literature of the "unpresentable" (modern) sublime, let me hasten to point out that the apparent contradiction disappears in the light of Lyotard's paradoxical characterization of modern and postmodern art of the sublime as having to "present" the unpresentable. While the term "presentation" emphasizes directness, and "representation" indirectness, they may be regarded as interchangeable for my present purposes, which is why I sometimes make use of lexical forms like "(re-)presentation" and "un(re)-presentability". The reason is that I don't believe that even a "direct" mode of address such as Hamm's final speech is direct in the sense of escaping mediacy, nor are bodily movements; in both cases we are confronted by *re*presentations in the sense that they constitute interpretable complexes or acts of signification. My point is simply that the "musical" mode of (re)-presentation in Beckett's art (specifically in *Endgame*) unmistakably implicates the sublime in the guise of the Schopenhauerian will. Besides, the connection between music and the sublime is not an arbitrary one, as Kevin Barry has shown (Norris 1990: 208-221): in the late eighteenth century various writers thought of music as a system of "empty" signs in order to account for the fact that the aesthetic enjoyment of music had nothing to do with it "representing" the real world. And, as Norris (pp. 210-211) reminds us, it was but a short step from here to an aesthetics of the sublime.

It therefore appears that Beckett's literary art is exemplary in its enactment of Schopenhauer's aesthetic: in terms of this doctrine art affords us the opportunity to apprehend the innermost being of the world for a fleeting eternity, suspending time and thus penetrating the veil of representations. In a familiar passage Schopenhauer phrases it in the following way:

> Whilst science, following the restless and unstable stream of the fourfold forms of reasons or grounds and consequents, is with every end it attains again and again directed farther, and can never find an ultimate goal or complete satisfaction ...; art, on the contrary, is everywhere at its goal. For it plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of the world's course, and holds it isolated before it. This particular thing, which in that stream was an infinitesimal part, becomes for art a representative of the whole, an equivalent of the infinitely many in space and time. It therefore pauses at this particular thing; it stops the wheel of time; for it the relations vanish; its object is only the essential, the Idea. We can therefore define it accurately as *the way of considering things independently of the principle of sufficient reason* ....
>
> (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 185)

Moreover, Beckett's art approximates the condition of music which, as pointed out earlier, is unique among the arts in being the immediate manifestation of the will's conflictual character as creativity and destructivity. Paradoxically, this insight via art into being-as-will enables us to *overcome* the will (for the duration of the aesthetic experience) and to attain the "blessedness of will-less perception" (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 198). This means, of course, to be temporarily relieved of the burden of individuality with its ceaseless rhythm of desire (will) and gratification, i.e. to lose the self[5] in a kind of aesthetic ecstasy - something that is not only frequently enacted by Beckett's characters,[6] but which the peculiarly "musical" character of a play like *Endgame* enables the audience to experience as well. This corresponds to the "second" moment that Kant (1969: 103) distinguishes in the experience of the sublime, namely the pleasure of comprehending the sublime as that which surpasses all imaginative (re)presentation, the more primary moment being precisely the pain accompanying the realization that we are confronted by something we are incapable of grasping (re)presentationally -even if, paradoxically, our only access to it is *via* sensation and/or imagination.

In this way Beckett's play truly takes us, in Schopenhauerian terms, beyond representation, beyond (non-)knowledge of the self and of others to the inner being of the world - in fact, of all things, including our "selves" - where representation is dissolved and individuality is lost. Which means that the "will-less knowing" attained in this way is really, epistemologically speaking, quite futile, in view of the paradoxical fact that what is apprehended lies wholly outside the realm of representation and is as such, nothing, or, as suggested at the outset in this essay, is the sublime, which is nothing representable. Hence the "inexpressible depth of all music, by virtue of which it floats past us as a paradise quite familiar and yet eternally remote ... so easy to understand and yet so inexplicable" (Schopenhauer

1969 I: 264). Hence, too, the significance of Beckett's reference to "the beautiful [musical] convention of the *da capo* as a testimony to the intimate and ineffable nature of an art that is perfectly intelligible and perfectly inexplicable" (Beckett 1965: 92). It is therefore not surprising that despite an ostensible progression on a verbal level, one gets the uncanny impression that *Endgame* (1958) (or *Waiting for Godot* 1971) has a kind of interminable *da capo* structure, that one witnesses the same thing, not twice, but over and over. Schopenhauer would have found this hard to imagine:

> ... the *Da capo* would be intolerable in the case of works composed in the language of words. In music, however, they are very appropriate and beneficial; for to comprehend it fully, we must hear it twice.
>
> (1969 I: 264)

But, of course, he did not know Beckett's drama which approximates (if not realizes) the art of music. In the passage quoted from *Endgame*, a *da capo* actually occurs when Hamm repeats: "You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness" (Beckett 1958: 52).

The evidence that *Endgame* exemplifies the structure of the *da capo* convention in music does not end here. Ruby Cohn remarks on the pervasiveness of repetition in the play, and does not fail to note the musical connection either: "The verbal music of *Endgame* has a dying fall; the constant repetition yields macabre mirth" (Cohn 1969: 42). She enumerates the most significant instances of these repetitions - the recurrent emphasis on finishing or ending prominent among them, from the opening words of the play, Clov's "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (p. 12) to Hamm's virtual echo of these (p. 35): "It's finished, we're finished. Nearly finished" (Cohn 1969: 41-42). (One may perhaps look at Beckett's work in its entirety in terms of such repetition, but this falls outside the scope of the present article.)

Another aspect of *Endgame's* paradigmatic instantiation of the Schopenhauerian will comes into view here. "As the comic and intolerable emphasis on waiting summarizes the major action of *Godot*, so the many 'finished's' point to the death of a world in *Endgame*", remarks Cohn (1969: 42). If, as she further observes, "in the play we watch death's relentless invasion of 'here'", culminating in what seems to be Hamm's preparation for his own death (pp. 51-52), we may - without the advantage of a Schopenhauerian frame of reference - erroneously conclude that the play is about the end of *the* world. Indications are that "the show goes on" (pp. 40), and that, at the play's end, "the whole absurd, heartbreaking cycle begins again" (p. 52), *da capo*. In terms of the philosophy of the will, the repetitive structure of

the play, the fact that the sameness of time and space is asserted (Cohn 1969: 13-14) and that Hamm replies "Never!" to Clov's imploring "Let's stop playing!" (p. 49), all contribute to the impression that *Endgame* is an extended metaphor of the blind self-perpetuation of the Schopenhauerian will. Between the *ennui* of *Godot* (cf. Cormier & Pallister 1979: 39-44) and the suffering of *Endgame* swings the will's pendulum. Recall Schopenhauer on humankind, "the most complete objectification of this will ... its life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents" (1969 I: 312). It is no accident, however, that one is led to this insight via the repetitive *structure* of the play, *Endgame*: the will, as content, is necessarily omitted. It is the "missing contents" in this dramatic-literary art of the sublime.

To experience *Endgame* aesthetically would then be to behold the perpetual motion of the will's music, which lies beyond representation of self or other and which imparts epistemologically futile "knowledge of", but concomitantly, aesthetically effective and sublimely pleasurable liberation from the will's relentless and never-ending drive for satisfaction in the individual. But perhaps one should go further than Schopenhauer seems to allow us, and question the supposed futility of this knowledge, especially in the light of Beckett's work, understood (as I have tried to show) as a literature of the (modern) sublime. After all, the distance dividing the "modern" sublime and its "postmodern" counterpart, is, as in the case of Nietzsche's two types of nihilism, the distance between passivity and activity (which, incidentally, also marks the difference between Schopenhauer's life-negating and Nietzsche's life-affirming philosophies (Olivier 1994: 58)). This passivity and activity manifest themselves, in Lyotard's terms, in nostalgia (hence the "missing contents") and innovation, respectively - a pertinent consideration regarding the possibility of a literature of the un(re)presentable. In Beckett's case, we have a "modern" literature which enables us to "share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable" (Lyotard 1984: 81), but the possibilities of literary representation do not end here, as the innovative character of the postmodern sublime suggests. Lyotard himself gives an indication of what these might be in the following passage on Burke, one of the eighteenth century theorists of the sublime:

> Now Burke attributes to *poetry*, or what we would now call writing, the twofold and thwarted finality of inspiring terror (or threatening that language will cease, as we would put it) and of meeting the challenge posed by this failure of the word by provoking or accepting the advent of an "unheard of" phrase. He deems painting incapable of fulfilling this sublime office in its own order. Literature is free to combine words and to experiment with sentences; it has within it an unlimited power, the power of language in all its sufficiency, but in Burke's view

> the art of painting is hampered by the constraints of figurative representation. With a simple expression like "The Angel of the Lord", he writes, the poet opens up an infinite number of associations for the mind; no painted image can equal that treasure; it can never be in excess of what the eye can recognize.
>
> (Lyotard 1991: 84-85)

Needless to say, while one may sympathize with Burke regarding the limitations of the visual arts in representing the sublime - think of the arguable impoverishing effect of translating a rich literary text into film, for instance - he may also be challenged on that score, as Lyotard (1991: 84) indeed does by interpreting Newman's painting in terms of the sublime. As he points out (p. 85), if the sublime cannot be adequately represented, it can at least be alluded to or evoked - something Kant referred to as "negative presentation".

While the visual arts, therefore, face the challenge of finding visual means to "evoke" the sublime, i.e. of overcoming, perhaps exploiting, the "paradox of a representation which represents nothing" (Lyotard 1991: 85), literature has to draw on the excess of meaning, or "infinite number of associations" embedded in, or perhaps more accurately, generated by language as writing. As previously shown regarding *Endgame*, Beckett brings us face to face with the sublime in the form of the (absent) Schopenhauerian will: the "feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over" (p. 84). To this end, Beckett employs the resources of language, especially its "musical" possibilities, as I have pointed out. Hence the impression of what I previously termed "passivity" - the feeling that what happens, despite everything, has a repetitive, *da capo* structure. However, the resources of language may also be and have been employed innovatively to overcome this impression of passivity, as for instance a number of writers since (and including) Joyce have done. A literature which accepts this challenge, must overcome the "passive nihilism" of the nostalgic sublime in a writing which would allow an unimaginable proliferation of meanings - a writing that would be actively creative in the face of the faceless sublime, that would "dance upon the abyss" in the Nietzschean sense (Olivier 1994: 58).

* This article is a reworked version of a paper read at the International Schopenhauer Congress, Hamburg, Germany, 27 May 1988.

Notes

1. These last words also comprise a succinct comment, on Beckett's part, on the question of suicide. His comment then appears to be perfectly in line with Schopenhauer's position concerning the matter which can be summed up as follows: if life consists essentially of suffering (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 309-312), the obvious thing to do seems to be to commit suicide. Schopenhauer rejects this position, however, arguing that it is contradictory to suppose that suffering, which ensues from the essential insatiability of the will (desire, need, etc.), can be permanently removed or alleviated by an act of will (viz. suicide). Besides, this does not terminate suffering as such, but only a particular individuation of the will, i.e. a person. It is worth noting that here, again, the peculiar sense in which the specific individual is less essentially real than the one, pervasive will, comes to the fore. It is not so much a matter of identity being illusory as such. In terms of representation, it is real. But in terms of essential reality, viz. will, it is illusory, because even the person's character as modification of the will, is inscrutable (cf. Schopenhauer 1969 I: 398-400; 1972: 77-79). See also Pankow's (1985: 231-232) illuminating discussion of Beckett's appropriation of the Schopenhauerian stance on suicide.

2. It is worth quoting Goldman at greater length on the question of Beckett's characters:

   > Are they indeed characters as we understand the fictive personage - possessed of traits of varying "organization" or strength, changing with time and event, possessed of a will, character, and temperament? ... does not Beckett's technique consume character?
   >
   > (Goldman 1969: 38)

   This seems to me to confirm the comprehensibility of Beckett's art in terms of the "missing contents" characteristic of (Lyotard's) modern aesthetics of the sublime.

3. This means simply that, according to Schopenhauer, the arts reveal the *essence(s)* of phenomena in the world. In architecture, for example, the will appears objectively in the form of the *Idea* (or essence) of the "conflict between gravity and rigidity" (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 214).

4. Stage directions omitted - B.O.

5. Keeping in mind the earlier discovery that the essence of the "self" - the unitary will - surpasses the bounds of "selfhood", the paradox should be clear: the "ecstasy" of aesthetic experience is a loss of the "(non-)self" which, while one may expect it to catapult us into the domain of the one essential reality, called *will* by Schopenhauer, actually simultaneously consists in the liberation from this essential reality in terms of a subject-less state of cognition (Schopenhauer 1969 I: 197-199). Hence aesthetic experience, which brings us face to face with the

groundless essence of the world, rids us of our own "face" (the self) as well as of the burden of that which we face - the will. Perhaps the key to understanding this puzzle lies simply in grasping the self as *modification* of the will, so that losing the one is automatically evading the hold of the other. But this may be to evade the difficulty.

6. Pankow has shown how this loss of the self occurs in Beckett's novels, for instance in *Molloy*. He makes the connection between Beckett and Schopenhauer explicit:

> Das Niederfallen der Identitätsschranken wird von Beckett mit Erlösungsvisionen überblendet; der Anschauende und das Angeschaute werden eins, wie Schopenhauer dies von der ästhetischen Anschauung behauptete .... (Pankow 1985: 232-233)

Moreover, this indicates that - as Pankow also points out - Beckett's aesthetics leads, as in the case of his philosophical mentor's, to an ethics (cf. Schopenhauer 1969 I: 378-382).

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