

The Endgame of Aesthetics: From Hegel to Beckett*

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What to make of Hegel's *Aesthetics* "in these times"? The question causes some embarrassment, and the embarrassment is, I guess, structural. The name "Hegel" continues to be a battlefield (as it has been throughout the last 200 years), and the two camps at war largely see Hegel either as a metaphysical monstrosity best to be forgotten or displayed as an item in a horror show, that is, either as the scarecrow against whom we must pave new ways for a post-metaphysical thought, or else as the hero whose thought is as radical today as it was "in those times," presenting a radical edge that was not superseded but rather obfuscated by what came after, so that the new ways of thought would have to take their cue from there. There is hardly any middle ground between these two fronts, and with Hegel one is always in the line of fire. While I clearly belong to this latter camp, it nevertheless seems that there is a predicament with his *Aesthetics*, which rather tends to provide ample and easy ammunition to the former camp, i.e., that of his adversaries.

Regardless of their camp, all would agree, of course, that the *Aesthetics* presents a landmark, a monument. It is the first ambitious and systematic treatise on aesthetics as a new discipline, written three quarters of a century after its official birth, that is, after Baumgarten in 1750 singlehandedly canonized the new term and

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the new area, bringing together the hitherto dispersed reflections on beauty and art in an organized new field. Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), was probably the last one who could speak of aesthetics in the traditional sense as the general theory of sensation, *Sinnlichkeit*, with the transcendental aesthetics dealing with the a priori forms of (sensuous) intuition, providing its universal rules. But already a decade later, in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant espoused the new usage and spoke of the faculty of aesthetic judgment, which deals not with the universal rule, but with its exceptions, i.e., the singular occasions that call for (non)universal judgments of taste, or the paradoxical “universality without a concept.” Hegel’s *Aesthetics* then appears as the first monumental treatment of this new discipline, encompassing all areas, as well as the historical development of art throughout millennia, in a broad and exhaustive sweep, itself situated in an even broader sweep of a philosophical system, assigning aesthetics and art a proper place, a suitable slot within the overarching systematic edifice. But once formed, this first aesthetics appears also to be the last one, for Hegel in the same breath also notoriously proclaimed its demise. Aesthetics was a very lively yet stillborn child, so that any subsequent proposal of aesthetics (and there was no lack of them) had to deal with the suspicion of its being already antiquated—none of these proposals quite followed Hegel’s views and were largely opposed to them, yet they couldn’t quite escape Hegel’s shadow, the shadow of a doubt. There is, there always has been, a malaise in aesthetics, to use Rancière’s term (2004; 2009), a discontent necessarily accompanying its very existence. Hegel managed an incredible feat: at the birth of aesthetics, he also made it obsolete, so that the lively stillborn child could subsequently only live an afterlife, without ever quite enjoying an unblemished life.

So, everybody more or less agrees that Hegel’s *Aesthetics* is a monument; but a monument to what? There are several paradoxes to be noted here. The first comprehensive and systematic philosophical treatment of art strangely coincides with the extensive discussion, or even the instauration, of the autonomy of art, the

establishment of art as a circumscribed region of human endeavor, an autonomous domain which serves no other purpose than itself. The slogan *l'art pour l'art*, “art for art’s sake,” prominent already in the 1820s, probably stems from Victor Cousin, Hegel’s early French follower (Rue Victor Cousin still runs alongside the Sorbonne), before it was vastly advertised by Théophile Gautier in the 1830s (most famously in the preface to his 1835 novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*). Up to the Latinized version, *ars gratia artis*, which appeared in the MGM logo encircling the notorious roaring lion, with Hollywood thus extending its provenance to a fake antiquity. Thus the autonomy of art, divorcing art from the religious and ritual setting and from any social use or utility, emerged together with Hegel’s *Aesthetics* which sounded its death-knell. Once art appeared as independent and autonomous, liberated from its other usages and extraneous meanings, it was already proclaimed obsolete.

The proclamation of art for art’s sake is clearly spelled out by Hegel:

[A]rt’s vocation is to unveil [enthüllen] the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration, to set forth the reconciled opposition just mentioned [i.e. between reason and senses], and so to have its end and aim in itself, in this very setting forth and unveiling. For other ends, like instruction, purification, bettering, financial gain, struggling for fame and honor, have nothing to do with the work of art as such, and do not determine its nature. (Hegel 1973, p. 55; 1986, Vol. 13, p. 82)

This can be seen as roughly in line with Kant’s qualification of aesthetic judgments as disinterested (*Wohlgefallen ohne Interesse*), but Hegel completely divorced aesthetics from the question of the beautiful which would encompass nature and culture alike. He had no real interest in natural beauty and the charms of nature (although he paid some lip-service to the topic)—for all these, ultimately three words would suffice, *es ist so*, “so is it,” no further cause for admiration.

But after this extolling the vocation of art as the unveiling of truth by sensuous means, and nobly serving its own elevated

ends without any other concern, we may be surprised to learn the following:

For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself. [...] We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit. (Hegel 1973, p. 103)¹

And there is quite a bit more along these lines. Art, once established as a domain, is out-of-date; the moment when it has achieved its own freedom and auto-legislation is the moment when spirit abandoned it.

It is difficult to fully appreciate Hegel's gesture against the grain of the time and his stance against great odds. The big break presented by the French Revolution instigated a lot of high-flown speculations and declarations about the end of an epoch and a thrilling beginning of a new one, where art was called upon to fulfill a high mission, occupying the role previously reserved for religion, enhancing and complementing the new political prospects, the establishment of new forms of sociability. One can recall Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), born of a disappointment with the violent turn of the French Revolution and turning to art as the highest human endeavor, now entrusted with the education of a new humankind, which can finally arrive at itself by means of its free play. One can recall the high hopes and ambitions of Romantic poetry. And one can above all recall Hegel's own early participation in drawing up the short piece that became known as "The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism," designed together with Schelling and Hölderlin in 1796/97. Three youngsters, three roommates, three enthusiasts

¹ "However all this may be, it is certainly the case that art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone [...]. // In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place." (Ibid., pp. 10–11)

for the Revolution, just before entering the German and European philosophical and literary stage in grand ways, wrote together this brief manifesto, this immodest proposal, which should define, among other things, precisely the nature of art at this historical juncture. Of art the fragment says the following:

Finally, the idea that unites all others, the idea of *beauty*, taking the word in a higher Platonic sense. I am now convinced that the highest act of reason is an aesthetic act since it comprises all ideas [...]. The philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as the poet. [...] The philosophy of the spirit is an aesthetic philosophy. One cannot have spirit in anything, one cannot even reason in an inspired way about history, without aesthetic sense. [...] // In this manner poetry will gain a higher dignity, and it will again become at the end what it was at the beginning—the *teacher of the humanity* [*Lehrerin der Menschheit*]. For there is no more philosophy, no more history; poetry alone will outlive all other sciences and arts. ([Anon] 1996, p. 4; Hegel 1986, Vol. 1, p. 235)

So there we have it: art (and poetry stands for all others as the highest art, given Hölderlin's co-authorship of the "Program," and considering Hegel's later hierarchy of the arts) is the universal unifying idea, subsuming all others; and an idea can exert its power only insofar it is aesthetically embodied, and hence addressed to and available to everyone. Art stands for the universality of humanity, as opposed to the state which stands for the mechanical, the unfree. The goal would be for art to come to occupy the place previously occupied by the state (the fragment equally calls for the suppression of the state as such).² Art is itself a utopian

² "First of all the *idea* of humanity. I want to show that there is no more an idea of the *state* than there is an idea of a machine, because the state is something mechanical. Only that which is an object of freedom can be called an *idea*. We must therefore go beyond the state [über den Staat hinaus]! For every state must treat free human beings as if they were cogs in a machine [Räderwerk]; but that it should not do; therefore it should *cease* to exist [also soll er aufhören]." ([Anon] 1996, pp. 3–4; Hegel 1986, Vol. 1, pp. 234–35)

state without boundaries that can supplant the mechanical state; there is a universal citizenship only in art. It should also come to supplant both religion and philosophy, for the continuation of the fragment calls for a new “mythology of reason,” *Mythologie der Vernunft*—reason by itself is powerless unless it employs mythological, sensuous, and sensual means, hence the call for the philosopher endowed with aesthetic powers. Reason by itself is empty and mythology, divorced from reason, is blind, so one should strive for the happy unification of the two. Instead of philosopher kings, as in Plato, the poet leaders. And there is the overarching prospect of reconciliation of reason and the sensuous that only aesthetics can provide, replacing and superseding both politics and religion as now antiquated forms of spirit.

But then, a quarter of a century later, the perspective is completely overturned and directed against the massive tide of ideas promoted by ambient and rampant Romanticism: art itself, at the point that seemed to present its highpoint and historic triumph, finally on its own, is now seen as the form that spirit has already surpassed. What seemed to be the culmination of its power coincided with its demise; if not quite demise then its being relegated to a side-show, spirit having moved on—on to where? (*On?* I will come back to this word, so simple and so manifold, so treacherous in its simplicity.) Art, so lively and so vigorous until it could come on its own and finally be itself, seems to be doomed to afterlife, just like aesthetics, precisely at the moment when it could at long last for the first time fully embrace its life.

If there is a more or less general agreement that Hegel’s *Aesthetics* presents a landmark and a monument, then from there on the paths sharply diverge. Here I come back to the point that *Aesthetics*, more than Hegel’s other works (matched perhaps only by the philosophy of nature), provides ample ammunition to Hegel’s detractors. Its general narrative may indeed look like a caricature of the notorious Hegelian teleology: art is ranked the lowest of the three prominent spiritual domains, it is to be

followed and superseded by religion and finally by philosophy (and science, but science is another name for philosophy). Art stands at the lowest and initial rank in this progression because of its entanglement with the sensuous: in art the idea is manifested through sensuous means, it is *das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee*, the sensuous appearance and the sensuous shining through of the idea. It is superseded by religion which proceeds by means of representation, *Vorstellung*, and finally, by philosophy-science, which seems to have divested itself from the sensuous and the “material,” so that it is able to proceed by concepts alone, the true realm of spirit coming to its own, dealing with itself on its own grounds, liberated from alterity. It all looks like a process of a gradual massive *Aufhebung* as the process of continuing dematerialization, spiritualization, getting rid of what is alien to spirit, thus a purification of spirit, its distillation and refinement. Art is well on the way there, but not yet there, eternally not yet, however accomplished and consummate its spiritual production may be.

But while on the one hand we give this high position to art, it is on the other hand just as necessary to remember that neither in content nor in form is art the highest and absolute mode of bringing to our minds the true interests of the spirit. For precisely on account of its form, art is limited to a specific content. Only one sphere and stage of truth is capable of being represented in the element of art. [...] On the other hand, there is a deeper comprehension of truth which is no longer so akin and friendly to sense as to be capable of appropriate adoption and expression in this medium. (Hegel 1973, p. 9)

This progression, which conditions and frames the placement of aesthetics in the system, is then internally repeated within the structure of the aesthetics itself, and doubly so. First, by the all-embracing overview of its history progressing through the phases of the symbolic art, with the still abstract idea being thrust upon an external sensual material; then, of the classical art which can attain the balance of the form and the content such that “the

Idea is able to come into free and complete harmony” (ibid., p. 77); and finally, of Romantic art where “[i]nwardness celebrates its triumph over the external and manifests its victory in and on the external itself, whereby what is apparent to the senses alone sinks into worthlessness” (ibid., p. 81). “In this way romantic art is the self-transcendence of art but within its own sphere and in the form of art itself” (ibid., p. 80).

Second, the particular branches and areas of art follow the same progression, with architecture at the bottom end roughly corresponding to the symbolic art form, sculpture to the classical one and finally painting, music and poetry corresponding to the Romantic stage, with poetry as the highest stage (almost) divested of the sensual materiality.

For sound, the last external material which poetry keeps, is in poetry no longer the feeling of sonority itself, but a *sign*, by itself void of significance, a sign of the idea which has become concrete in itself. [...] Yet this sensuous element [...] is here cut free from the content of consciousness, while spirit determines this content on its own account and in itself and makes it into ideas. To express these it uses sound indeed, but only as a sign in itself without value or content. (Hegel 1973, pp. 88–89)³

Poetry may be the highest art, yet it is still not there, it is to be superseded by prose, the proper element of thought.

Yet, precisely, at this highest stage, art now transcends itself, in that it forsakes the element of a reconciled embodiment of the spirit in sensuous form and passes over from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought. (Hegel 1973, p. 89)

³ As Hegel himself summarizes this progression: “Consider, for example, the sensuous material. In that case architecture is the crystallization, sculpture the organic configuration, of matter in its sensuous and spatial totality; painting is the colored surface and line; while, in music, space as such passes over into the inherently filled point of time; until, finally, in poetry the external material is altogether degraded as worthless.” (Ibid., p. 89)

Thus, the whole construction of the book, the structure of the project, is based on a progression leading from the embeddedness in sensuous materiality towards the liberation in thought. Art is a liberation, yet not a liberation from the sensuous, but a process of liberation within the sensuous itself, carving the idea into the sensuous, embodying it through *das sinnliche Scheinen*. Still, the goal is to rid the idea of this otherness in order for it to reach its proper realm.

So here we have it, Hegel's notorious teleology fully spelled out, in fully fledged letters, in bold, as it were, and too large to be dismissed. Spirit is always on the move, progressing, but not yet "there"; and "there" is like a scale of this progress, so that one can measure where on this scale one finds oneself, how far from "there" or how close to it. Of course, this is a *prima facie* reading, massively imposing itself, so that one almost overlooks the opposite direction that has to be considered—the teleology running in reverse, as it were. For if spirit is always on the way "there," it is never "there," not yet—if it was to be "there" it would cease to be spirit. It can only be spirit as long as it's not on its own, as long as it grapples with its alterity, its opposite, its other, not being able to abandon its *Sichanderswerden*, its self-othering, as the apt English translation has it. So, Hegel also says the following:

In the products of art, the spirit has to do solely with its own. And even if works of art are not thought or the Concept, but a development of the Concept out of itself, a shift of the Concept from its own ground to that of sense [eine Entfremdung zum Sinnlichen hin], still the power of the thinking spirit lies in being able not only to grasp itself in its proper form as thinking, but to know itself again [wiederzuerkennen] just as much when it has surrendered [Entäußerung] its proper form to feeling and sense, to comprehend itself in its opposite [in seinem Anderen] [...]. And in this preoccupation with its opposite the thinking spirit is not false [ungetreu] to itself at all as if it were forgetting and abandoning itself thereby, nor is it so powerless as to be unable to grasp what is different from itself; on the contrary, it comprehends both itself and its opposite [sein

Gegenteil]. For the Concept is the universal which maintains itself in its particularizations [Besonderungen], overreaches itself and its opposite, and so it is also the power and activity of cancelling again the estrangement in which it gets involved. (Hegel 1973, pp. 12–13; 1986, Vol. 13, pp. 27–28)

No spirit without estrangement. No spirit without it being out of spirit. Should it simply get to its own element and be equal to itself, it would evaporate. The object of spirit is precisely its not being there yet. The “not yet” is not just the delay on the way “there,” it’s the condition of spirit having an object at all. The “not yet” is also an “always already,” the station in the reverse direction, the “backwards teleology” of the always already accomplished instead of expecting to move on to some higher stage. This is why Hegel can state that the realization of the infinite goal is getting rid of the illusion that it hasn’t been accomplished yet. The imperfect realization, measured by the scale of progression, is at the same time the accomplishment, as perfect as one can get. Or in other words, if art’s entanglement with the sensuous can be seen as its resistance to spirit in its inexorable progress, then one must see that *spirit is nothing but the resistance to spirit*.

Here I must refer to Rebecca Comay’s remarkable essay “Resistance and Repetition: Freud and Hegel” (2015) which spells out precisely this point. Let me quote just the abstract which puts it most economically:

This essay explores the vicissitudes of resistance as the central concept of both Freud and Hegel. Read through the prism of psychoanalysis, Hegel appears less as a philosopher of inexorable progress [...] than as a thinker of repetition, delay, and stuckness. It is only on this seemingly unpromising basis that the radical potential of both thinkers can be retrieved. (Comay 2015, p. 237)⁴

⁴ To take up just one quote on Hegel: “Either the work never gets started or the work gets finished all too soon. These are two sides of the same coin,

So, in this light I would like to take Hegel's *Aesthetics* not as the vintage case of the progression of spirit, with art itself and every art form placed on the scale of the "not yet," but rather in the light of stuckness of spirit, its essential tarrying with the delay, its being stuck with the object which emerges in the "not yet." Instead of the haste of spirit, constantly hurrying on, its postponement and interruption; instead of the impatience of moving on, the patience of the concept (*Geduld*).⁵ Instead of Adorno's image of the Hegelian spirit as the enormous gulping mouth where everything is consumed, devoured and digested, rather the spirit where everything is stuck in the throat.⁶ Instead of the hierarchy of progression, the reverse stuckness, the object persisting on the retroactive vector.

One can make a simple claim that the "not yet," the delay, the stuckness, the resilient lack in regard to the supposed progress, the lagging behind, the ingrained deficiency, inadequacy, the flaw—that all that is the Real of the Hegelian spirit. It is what constitutes its object. If I am to make a quick and persuasive demonstration of the object-value of the work of art, the stuckness with the art object, then I can do no better than to quote Hegel's astounding image of the artwork and its obstinate being there:

[I]t is to be asserted of art that it has to convert every shape in all points of its visible surface into an eye [zum Auge], which is the seat of the soul and brings the spirit into appearance. [...] [A]rt makes every one of its productions into a thousand-eyed Argus,

which for Hegel stake out the outer limits of German Idealism—the evil twins, roughly speaking, of Kant and Schelling: the tepid waters of endless critical reflection versus the skyrockets of rapturous revelation; the bad infinite of interminable postponement versus the 'bad finite' of instant gratification, delay versus haste." (Ibid., p. 260)

⁵ Here, I have to refer to the wonderful book on Hegel which takes this as the guideline: Lebrun 1972. I cannot imagine why it is not translated into English.

⁶ This inevitably recalls Lacan: "[...] the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier." (Lacan 1981, p. 270)

whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point. And it is not only the bodily form, the look of the eyes, the countenance and posture, but also actions and events, speech and tones of voice, and the series of their course through all conditions of appearance that art has everywhere to make into an eye, in which the free soul is revealed in its inner infinity. (Hegel 1973, pp. 153–54; 1986, Vol. 13, pp. 203–204)

There is the Greek legend of Argus, the mythical giant with a hundred eyes (not a thousand, as Hegel says), Argus Panoptes, the all-seeing Argus (a precursor of the Panopticon), whom Hera hired to watch over Io, a nymph that Zeus fell in love with and who was transformed into a white cow guarded by this super-watchman. The legend has it that Argus could sleep at all times with some of his eyes while the majority would always be open and on the watch. So Hegel proposes this very strange and troubling image: a work of art is like Argus, this giant hundred-eyed monster, everything in the work of art turns into an eye, its every element and move should be considered as an eye, a stand-in for the eye. We never simply watch an artwork, it watches us at the same time. Of course Hegel follows the traditional notion that the eyes are the seat of the soul, its revelation, the part of the body where the soul manifests itself, but pushing Hegel a bit one could make him say that what makes art special is the way that the object, i.e. the object gaze, is inscribed into the artwork. It is the kind of object which never simply exists out there, opposite to the observing subject, separate and independent — if it is an artwork worthy of its name then it has the capacity to embody the gaze, to be not just the object of the gaze, but the object into which the gaze is inscribed, a short-circuit between the subject and the object. It is not that the artwork returns the gaze in a symmetrical exchange and recognition, it is rather that it has to acquire in some form the quality of anamorphosis, the blur that regards us, its gaze entwined with our own. It is not that the spiritual gaze can recognize the gaze of the spirit inscribed in the artwork, it

is rather that the objecthood of the artwork involves a gaze that cannot be returned. What singles out art is that it is never simply an object—what we have to figure out in its enigmatic appearance is not just the way in which we are inscribed into it, but the way it embodies the gaze appearing to us as an enigma that we cannot self-reflexively grasp. To push it to the extreme: every artwork is anamorphic, art is the anamorphosis in the picture of society. In other words: Hegel's object always involves an inkling of the object *a*, it is never reducible just to an object of recognition, the standard way that the dialectics of subject-object is conceived.⁷

All this is a general caveat about the nature of Hegel's teleology, the deceptive ease with which it is usually dealt with, the way his story is commonly recounted as that of progressive liberation from the alien, the purification, the gradual spiritualization of spirit. It is told as the story of spirit lost and found again, spirit lost in its otherness but happily finding itself in the end by getting rid of its otherness—but, first, what was lost never existed in the first place, so it can never be recuperated, and second, what is found has only been produced on the way, through the loss.

One would wish that “stuckness” could redeem Hegel's *Aesthetics*, but unfortunately maybe not quite. One cannot get easily off the hook, Hegel sometimes really doesn't make it easy for his supporters and fans, and *Aesthetics* is I guess one of the major instances of this. With all the caveats, it is hard to disregard what one can call Hegel's inveterate optimism. We are well on the way, history is progressing towards increasing liberation, there is the victorious march of reason, and even if it seems that reason sometimes takes strange and even catastrophic detours, they can still be recuperated by its cunning, so that there is no turn that couldn't be retrieved and reclaimed. When it looks like we might be heading for the worst, Hegel is waiting for us with the line: “*Denn erst das*

⁷ For an extensive treatment of Hegel's use of the Argus image, cf. Comay 2014.

ganz Schlechte hat die unmittelbare Notwendigkeit an sich, sich zu verkehren" (Hegel 1986, Vol. 3, p. 257); "for only what is wholly bad is implicitly charged with the immediate necessity of changing round into its opposite" (Hegel 1977, p. 206). Even the worst, and especially the worst, possesses the immediate necessity to turn over and pave the way for the best. There is no way to halt his optimism.⁸

So, art is progressing as well by its ever more sophisticated means to shuffle off its entanglement with the sensuous and the material, and if art is at an end this is a good sign, no reason for alarm, no panic, for we have new forms of reason that have superseded it in modern society, so it's all for the best. The bottom line is always: we are heading for the best.

This is where one feels an irresistible urge to supplement Hegel with Beckett, or even to take them together as a sort of Janus figure, the inscrutable Roman double-faced deity, the god (double god?) of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, duality, doorways, passages, and the god of endings. He is always depicted with a double face, *Ianus geminus*, redoubled in itself, its own twin and double, looking at the past with one face and at the future with the other, the literal embodiment of "one split into two."

Taking the cue from Beckett's *Worstward Ho* (1983), one of his last and most extreme texts, one is tempted to retroactively put Hegel's *Aesthetics* under the label of "bestward ho," heading for the best. So what seems to be Hegel's inveterate optimism and what seems to be Beckett's inveterate pessimism (mark the "seems"), are they two entirely different entities? Or are they rather to be read as the two-headed Janus? Can there be just a minimal difference, a slight shift of perspective, a parallax view, between Hegel's best and Beckett's worst? Another, more general

⁸The moments of nostalgia are rare, thus in the *History of Philosophy*, when speaking of the Greeks, Hegel writes: "Wenn es erlaubt wäre, eine Sehnsucht zu haben, so nach solchem Lande, solchem Zustande." (Hegel 1986, Vol. 18, p. 173) "If yearning were permitted, then it would be for such a land, for such a condition" (my translation).

way of putting the question would be: What happened between the inaugural moment of Hegel's *Aesthetics* (inauguration proclaiming the end of what it inaugurated) and the running out of modernism, the extreme endpoint of what announced itself (or the end of the ending that was announced) in *Aesthetics*?

I will take just Beckett's *Worstward Ho* as this ending point, the terminal stage of modernism, the maximum contrast, the extreme shriveling and withering away of art.⁹ No doubt there can be other candidates although I can't think of any quite as good. First for the title: it stems from the traditional call of boatmen on the river Thames, the river flowing from west to east, so one can either travel eastward or westward ("ho" being just an exclamation to attract attention). The call was part of folklore since the Middle Ages, so it was used a number of times, the first literary piece called *Westward Ho* was actually by John Webster (1604), in Shakespeare's time, and among several others there is a famous novel *Westward Ho!* (1855) by Charles Kingsley which Beckett knew well. (And there is a western with John Wayne called *Westward Ho* [1935].) Just a little twist is needed to turn this historic call, subsequently laden with all the prospects of finding new life which lies westward ("Go west, young man") into the new direction: "Go worst, young man!"

As historic sources go, here is another one which stems from Hegel's time and which again Beckett knew well. It comes from Lord Byron's epic poem *Lara* (1814), where we can find these lines:

Each pulse beats quicker, and all bosoms seem
To bound as doubting from too black a dream,
Such as we know is false, yet dread in sooth,
Because the worst is ever nearest truth.
(*Lara* XXVIII, Byron 1952, p. 311)

⁹The part on Beckett couldn't be written without the intense experience of the course on "Creaturely Modernism" that I co-taught with Eric Santner in the fall of 2017 at the University of Chicago. Thinking together with Eric informs these pages.

“The worst is ever nearest truth”: the line presupposes or assumes a certain “dialectical economy.” If one descends into the deepest abyss of the worst then one can come closest to truth, and truth is something that can ultimately redeem us. There is an economy of damnation and salvation: if one heads for the worst this will necessarily turn over, there will be a redemptive (if tragic) moment of truth. And it seems that so many of Beckett’s novels and plays can be read along these lines: one starts in a desperate situation already on page one and then it only gets worse, there is a descent, but in it and through it there can be a revelation of another dimension, something that can ultimately redeem us, beyond any traditional or religiously inclined notion of redemption. Only if one is willing to go to the bottom of darkness one would find light; only the one who looks undauntedly at the worst, the most miserable and meaningless facets of human existence, would thereby be able to find a way out of it. This can be seen as being in line with a certain understanding of Hegelian dialectics, precisely with the passage I already quoted, “for only what is wholly bad [the worst] is implicitly charged with the immediate necessity of changing round into its opposite [being overturned].” (Hegel 1977, p. 206) And this seems to be in line with Beckett’s own succinct proclamation of faith, as it were, from *Mirlitonrades* (1978): “*En face / le pire / jusqu’à ce / qu’il fasse rire.*” “Facing / the horror / returns to / laughter.” (Literally: “Face up / to the worst / until it / makes us laugh.”) The worst will yield, if not the best, then at least laughter (but is laughter redemptive? I will return to that).

I guess the most famous line which condenses this (dialectical?) logic is the one by Hölderlin (remember his taking part in the system fragment, together with Hegel and Schelling): “*Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch,*” “But where danger is the saving powers grow as well,” as one English translation has it (or in a popular pointed form: “Where the danger is at the greatest, the deliverance is at the closest”). Slavoj Žižek recently labeled this stance “the Hölderlin paradigm,” the redemptive

reversal of the worst.¹⁰ Is this what both Hegel and Beckett have in mind? I think this is precisely not the way to go about it, this is rather what Beckett tried to circumvent. There is a teleology in this paradigm that Beckett ultimately never espoused (although some of his lines can be read in this way). His aim was rather to undo this very alternative, to side-step this economy of salvation, the spontaneous eschatology, the secret belief in magic by which the worst would be dialectically overturned by its own inner necessity. (Or that the worst predicament is in itself already [the beginning of] a solution.)

Are we here departing from the Hegelian dialectical model, or are we departing just from a certain (mis)understanding of Hegel's dialectics? Is the Hölderlin paradigm ultimately also the Hegel paradigm? Can they be set apart? Following this paradigm "worstward ho" would secretly communicate with "bestward ho," they would ultimately amount to running into each other and being amalgamated. Beckett's pessimism would thus figure as the reverse side of Hegel's optimism, and it would seem that the former sustains the latter in an oblique and circuitous way, after the many disasters brought by the modern age. The worst would thus ultimately be the best in a very heavy disguise. But I don't think that this is a sufficient view. Something did happen between Hegel's heading for the best and Beckett's heading for the worst, something that cannot be quite dialectically superseded, *aufgehoben* — unless we propose a very different notion of dialectics, a dialectics with a non-dialectical twist. But maybe dialectics was always that, if properly understood or properly unraveled, the Hölderlin paradigm rather presenting a misleading and too easily available clue.

¹⁰ Cf. Žižek 2014, pp. 344–49. "[T]he danger of the catastrophic loss of the essential dimension of being-human also opens up the possibility of a reversal (*Kehre*)" (ibid., p. 344). Žižek sees this paradigm at work in very different quarters, from Judeo-Christian legacy to Marxism and Heidegger.

Let me proceed by giving another quote which may well be the key to *Worstward Ho*, this time from Shakespeare. These are the lines from *King Lear* that Beckett copied in his notebook:

Edgar (*aside*): And worse I may be yet. The worst is not
So long as we can say "This is the worst." (IV, 1, 31–32)

(The context of the scene is that Gloucester has been arrested and blinded, he is wandering around blind, wanting to be led to the cliff so that he can throw himself off and die, when he stumbles upon his son Edgar, the ousted legitimate son—denounced by Edmund, the illegitimate son, the villain—whom he can't recognize. Father and son meet as outlaws.)

Is this the key to the whole? There is a mind-boggling paradox here: if one says "this is the worst" then this is not the worst by the mere act of saying it, by virtue of it being spoken out at all. (Isn't there something of the liar's paradox that appears here?) If I can say it, I already miss it, I evoke the worst but at the same time by saying it I keep it at bay, by the minimal and unbridgeable distance of enunciation to the enunciated content. Merely to say "this is the worst" is already a falsehood. Edgar's words can be taken as a comfort, a relief—where there is speech there is hope? Language is thus an obstruction on the way to the worst, on the way to nothing. There is the impossibility of reaching being, but there is also the impossibility of reaching nothing, despite all the longing for it. "Worse in vain. Never to be naught" (Beckett 1983, p. 46). Language stands in the way, the means of getting there prevent us from getting there. This goes back to Beckett's reflections from the 1930s, half a century back:

And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. [...] As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until

what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. (Letter to Axel Kaun, 1937; Beckett 1984, p.172)

Maybe the whole text is to be read as an extension, a display of this paradox. It turns *Worstward Ho* into a self-defeating project, by clinging to the protective veil.¹¹ Language is in the way, language is the veil to be torn—but the veil is what constitutes its “aesthetic” value, aesthetics is the veil, it prevents the worst (however much Beckett is trying to go for it, there is always the “unnullable least”), it also prevents the best (with Hegel deeming aesthetics to be insufficient given its sensuality, but even surpassing the limitations of aesthetics one is perhaps still stuck with its “unnullable least”).

In conclusion, let me give five points, or five perspectives, on the relation between Hegel and Beckett, on the shift that happened between the two. Moving on; gray on gray; coming too late; how to end; and the value of the aesthetic.

First; Hegel’s spirit is always on the move. Once reaching aesthetics as the realm of the absolute spirit, its first stage, the spirit already proclaimed its being surpassed and obsolete. But the absolute spirit is the last section of the *Encyclopedia*, we are almost there: to give you the sense of proportion, the section on art begins 30 pages before the end of the project which (in the Suhrkamp edition, with all the *Zusätze*) is 1300 pages long, and the section on art itself comprises five pages in all—the five pages which (in the same edition) will be blown up to more than 1500 pages of the lectures on *Aesthetics*. Arriving at any stage we have to move on. If there is one imperative of the Hegelian spirit, then it seems to be “On!” Couldn’t this be put in a strange resonance with Beckett? If with Hegel we have the urge to go on towards

¹¹ But this would then perhaps also go for “bestward ho”—should one propose “The best is not so long as we can say “This is the best”?”

the supposedly ever higher realms of spirit, then with Beckett we have the reduction of the thrust to go on, to progress, the reduction to the pure thrust of persistence, of perseverance, with no higher aim. Except for heading for the worst, if this can be taken as Beckett's response to the teleology of the best—but why should one head anywhere if the scale of spirit no longer holds?

Here is the beginning of *Worstward Ho*, just the first paragraph.

On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on. (Beckett 1983, p. 7)

Let me just stop at the first word, the strange word “on,” and make three comments. First, *on* is obviously Greek for “being.” Philosophy started with *on*, with Aristotle's notorious *on to on*, “being *qua* being,” up to Hegel's “being, pure being,” the notorious beginning of his *Logic*. Couldn't the beginning of *Worstward Ho* be read as Beckett's version of the beginning of Hegel's *Logic*, i.e., as the counterpart to “being, pure being”? It is reduced to just “on,” but also repeated, “say on,” reflecting or highlighting the act of saying it, the performativity of saying “on,” involving an imperative (“Be said on.”), not just of “going on,” continuation, but also the imperative of saying it.¹²

Should the Greek *on* be read as the English *on*? Is “being” inherently tied with “on”? Perhaps this contingent encounter, this pun, this minimal example of what Lacan called *lalangue*, points to something far-reaching and essential. “Being” is never just based on an assertion that “it is,” but always involves an imperative dimension. On the one hand, there is an imperative

¹² One can recall that “On. Say on.” involves an echo, a transformation of the beginning of *The Unnamable*: “I, say I. Unbelieving.” (Beckett 2009, p. 285) Looking at this minimal structure, could one propose that *The Unnamable* corresponds to Hegel's *Phenomenology* while *Worstward Ho* corresponds to his *Logic*? From the starting point with consciousness to the starting point with being?

hiding under the apparent constative, and this is what Lacan aims at when he says that being, in ontology, is always “*l’être à la botte, l’être aux ordres*,” “being at the heel, being at someone’s beck and call,” something that inscribes being into the discourse of the master.¹³ There is a command under what seems to be a mere assertion, the most universal and neutral of all, stating mere being. On the other hand, there is an imperative dimension of being that doesn’t take its support in asserting the being that is and that can be established as the most universal category, but is “something” in being that is not (yet) being, and one can show the fidelity to this dimension only by persevering, by continuing, by following the insisting “on”; something that perhaps “will have been” and that we must take on by sheer persistence; something that “is not (yet)” but pertains only to the mode of “on.” Something that is “impossible” and yet it insists (hence the famous ending of *The Unnamable*, “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on”); something that doesn’t exist but merely insists. In the face of the master’s discourse, the insistence of the impossible.

Second. “On” is the inversion of “no,” and this was Beckett’s favorite word play “on” in the place of “no,” persistence based on negativity, through negativity, via negativity, as the shift of negativity, its reverse at the very same place. The beauty of it, if that is the right word (beauty beyond aesthetics?), is the absolute minimalism—“on” and “no” occupy the same spot, with the inversion of just two letters, a minimal anagram.

One interpretation gives a succinct comment:

¹³ “It seems that the pedicle is conserved here [in what Aristotle calls *to ti en einai*] that allows us to situate whence this discourse on being is produced—it’s quite simply being at someone’s heel, being at someone’s beck and call—what would have been if you had understood what I ordered you to do. // Every dimension of being is produced in the wake of the master’s discourse—the discourse of he who, proffering the signifier, expects therefrom one of its link effects that must not be neglected, which is related to the fact that the signifier commands. The signifier is, first and foremost, imperative.” (Lacan 1998, pp. 31–32)

The *no*, which expresses the impossibility of advancing, and the *on*, which designates the extreme urgency to move forward, are both equally constraining, imposing themselves on the subject in a univocal manner, allowing for no concession or dialectical compromise. These two antonyms offer no possibilities but compose a dilemma centred on an *impossible*. (Brown 2016, p. 200)¹⁴

Anecdotically, Beckett wrote *Worstward Ho* in English, and when pushed to translate it into French he gave up, he didn't feel capable of doing it, so the French translation was exceptionally done by someone else, Édith Fournier, and published two years after his death. There is no way to get this minimalism in any other language. So how did the French translator tackle this impossible task? "*Encore. Dire encore. Soit dit encore.*" (Beckett 1991, p. 7) Not the same at all—except that there is something gained in translation. *Encore*—sounds familiar? It strangely rejoins Lacan, *encore* to be read as an injunction. (Not to forget Lacan's own slogan "*il faut parier sur le pire*," one has to bet on the worst. But why didn't Lacan ever read or engage with Beckett?)

I can add Beckett's own reflections on negation, in conversation with Charles Juliet in 1968, without being able to comment on them properly here:

Negation is not possible. No more than affirmation. It is absurd to say that it is absurd. That is still to express a value judgment. One cannot protest, and one cannot consent. (After a long silence:) We have to stand where there is no possible pronoun, no solution, no reaction, no taking of position [...]. This is what makes the work so diabolically difficult. (Quoted in Brown 2016, p. 201)

What emerges is a being that can be neither affirmed nor denied, the "unnullable least" that creeps in and keeps persist-

¹⁴ To which one should add that dialectics is not a compromise, it is precisely this extreme tension of the two at the same time which pushes forward.

ing even if one wants to push to the end the negativity of being. Could one say there is but the minimal difference between being and non-being? One shouldn't make haste to proclaim it "beyond dialectics," it is perhaps what makes dialectics tic.¹⁵

Third. "On" is an injunction to continue, and given that "on" is the first word, we start with a continuation—in the beginning there is a continuation. If one says "on," something must have preceded, formally, so that one can then go "on," there is structurally a prolongation and an extension. It is as if we start with the second, not with the first. But what has preceded? There is no "something" that preceded "on," no something that would exist prior to "on," no first to have preceded the second: it is created, retroactively, by "on," both suppressed and brought forth by it. Maybe this constellation can be taken as exemplary: it has the structure of what Freud has called "the primary repression," *Urverdrängung*, the suppression of something that didn't exist prior to this suppression.¹⁶

Second point, second perspective: gray on gray. The best-known passage in Hegel runs:

When philosophy paints its grey in grey [Grau in Grau], then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood [known, *nur erkennen*]. The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the falling of dusk. (Hegel 2008, p. 16)

It is maybe not so strange that Hegel took gray to be the proper color of philosophy, taking the cue from Goethe's *Faust*:

¹⁵ The "unnullable least" can be connected to the concept of *den* which appears in Democritus' fragment 156, the fragment that Beckett referred to as one of the keys to his entire work (Beckett 1984, p. 113). One could propose a reading of *Worstward Ho* as a prosopopoeia of *den*: "I, *den*, speak." *Den* can't speak in first person, hence all the complicated strategies of mostly subjectless sentences, and no "I".

¹⁶ I must refer to Zupančič's *What is Sex?* (2017) and her brilliant discussion of the suppression of the binary signifier.

“*Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie, / Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.*” “Gray, my dear friend, is all theory, and green is the golden tree of life.” Hegel proudly took upon himself what was meant as a term of denigration of theory (can one say degray-dation?) and put it on his banner. It is stranger that Beckett took gray to be the color of his art—for art usually appeared on the side of “the green tree of life,” but not for Beckett. Beckett might well have been the only one who thought that art is even grayer than theory, and that that was a very good thing. Gray is not a color of life, it is a non-color, the discolored, dilapidated color, the indifferent mixture of all colors, the color of non-difference.¹⁷ It doesn’t even have the appeal of the absence of color, which is white, or its saturation, which is black. So gray on gray is the difference of the indifferent, of the indistinct, the minimal difference, the pure cut, the pure break. And since philosophy’s time is at dusk, i.e., at the vintage moment of grayness, the indifference between day and night, the moment of transition and transience, it is to be matched by another moment of twilight, the moment of dawn, the transition in the opposite direction, the other moment of the indistinct. So maybe gray on gray should be read in this way: the gray of dawn on the gray of dusk, the minimal difference between two transitions, the point where the gray of the evening is indiscernible from the gray of the morning; between two twilights, there is just the cut of their minimal difference.¹⁸ This is where Hegel may be seen to anticipate Beckett (as Comay pointed out); to take just one quote (from “Ping,” 1966): “Traces blurs light grey almost white on white.” (Beckett 1995, p. 193) Pale gray almost white on white: this is an even more dilapidated version of Hegel’s gray, a non-color. An anecdote tells that Beckett,

¹⁷ Here, I take my cue from Rebecca Comay’s book *Mourning Sickness* (2011) where she treats this magisterially.

¹⁸ “The doubling of gray on gray marks the almost indiscernible interval between dusk and dawn, between one twilight and another [...]. Turning evening into morning [...].” (Ibid., p. 143)

when asked about his wishes for his gravestone, allegedly said: “It can be of any color, as long as it’s gray.”

Third point: coming too late. To continue with the same quote from Hegel:

One word more about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it. As the *thought* of the world, it appears only when actuality has completed its process of formation and attained its finished state. (Hegel 2008, p. 16)

The seemingly obvious implication is: it’s too late, always already too late, philosophy is doomed to come too late, structurally it is lagging behind. One can read this as an anticipation of Beckett, in the general stance, a very fundamental turn or figure of thought that strangely connects two completely unrelated universes: everything is already finished, it’s over, we come too late, always already too late—this is the initial situation of almost all of Beckett’s texts, this is where they begin since the very first one on: already in *Murphy* (1937), his first novel, the first sentence runs: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.” (Beckett 2010, p. 3) So nothing new under the sun; from the first sentence on, we are too late, it’s already done. To turn this end into a beginning, a persistence, a loop that opens up, however totally restrained we may be by the oppressive finished reality, this may be seen as Beckett’s way to continue Hegel’s quote, as it were.

Fourth: the end. Both Hegel and Beckett are obsessed with the ending, with how to bring things to a proper end. We may always come too late, after the end, but this doesn’t mean that there has been a proper end, quite the opposite, this is where the drama starts. Another Beckett quote, epitomizing this at best: “The end is in the beginning and yet you go on” (Beckett 1986, p. 126). Hegel notoriously declared the end of history, the end of art, the end of philosophy—couldn’t this be taken precisely as the end which is at the beginning for Beckett? And then we go

on. Can the end end? Can there be an ending to the end? This is the key problem of *Endgame* (1958), the key text to consider in regard to Beckett's relation to the end, from which I can take just one point here. Freud wrote a paper called "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," and *Endgame* can be dubbed "ending terminable and interminable." Is there an end or not in the *Endgame*? The play's first line is: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (Beckett 1986, p. 93). But is it? There is an essential oscillation between the two, between the ending and the neverending. A number of interpreters (e.g., McMillan and Fehsenfeld 1988; Hesla 2005; etc.)¹⁹ have opted for the ending, for the first option, and they are not wrong—the play is permeated with maximum entropy, the utter exhaustion, the key grain has been added to the heap at the very beginning. But apart from the ample references in the play to the impossibility of ending, we also have Beckett's letter that firmly indicates the second option:

[T]he impossibility logically, i.e. eristically, of the "thing" ever coming to an end. [...] In other words, the impossibility of a catastrophe. Ended at its inception, and at every subsequent instant, it continues, ergo can never end." (Quoted in Weller 2005, p. 139)

The end lies in the past, not in the future, so it cannot end—or can it? Should one decide? Can one decide? I rather like the suggestion by Shane Weller, namely to take the very impossibility of the alternative as the solution:

When it arrives the end of playing fails to arrive. This failure does not mean, however, that the end simply hasn't arrived. Rather, it means that we, as the end's witnesses, are in no position to know whether the end has arrived or not. (Weller 2005, p. 140)

The end doesn't coincide with itself, there is the minimal difference of ending and not ending—is this the only end we can

¹⁹ For all these references cf. Weller 2005.

arrive at? Isn't this a very Hegelian solution to the problem of ending? The minimal difference between the event and the non-event, the end and no end, this is what we have to engage with.

Fifth, finally: the status of the aesthetic. Let me start with a comment on Beckett's humor. Simon Critchley (1997) amply argued that this is the redemptive trait in Beckett, the acknowledgment of finitude: we are descending into the abyss, but humor is there to save us, to relieve us. Indeed, Beckett seems to be saying something like this in "Face up to the worst—until it makes us laugh." And most strikingly: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (Beckett 1986, p. 101). But then, doesn't it mean that the unhappiness ensures the continuation of humor, and humor the continuation of unhappiness? So is humor redemptive? Maybe humor is the means of inflicting rather than alleviating suffering (cf. Weller 2005, p. 143). There is a trajectory "from the worst to laughter," but perhaps laughter is what makes it worse? Or can it be worse? Humor, laughter, etc. seem like a relief in Beckett's gloomy setting, but it is the relief that nails us down more. Perhaps humor doesn't avert the worst, but actually enhances it.

An analogous question can be raised about the aesthetic value, the poetic value of Beckett's texts. Can one simply treasure them for their aesthetic excellence? *Worstward Ho* is, on the face of it, incredibly economic and elegant, breathtakingly "beautiful" in the minimal means of "expression." It's a poem, with so many evocative puns, alliterations, assonances, echoes, the web of reverberations; it is the creation of a universe *ex nihilo* with the absolutely minimal, and then constantly in the same breath its decreation. In a way, it is a perfect work of art, in the sense that the unity of form and content has hardly ever been achieved to this level. All the content grows out of the minimal form of language, and there is no way to separate any content of *Worstward Ho* from the singular way it is told. Isn't this the classical ideal extolled by Hegel? But maybe this is what ultimately makes it all the more unbearable. Can one take aesthetics as a relief? Ultimately as a

consolation? Can there still be aesthetics in this? And if there is, doesn't it make it worse? Aesthetics is the real "worstward ho" pretending to be a defense against it. What would it mean to deem *Worstward Ho* beautiful for its poetic value? What standard of value of literature can one apply? Isn't the aesthetic value of it also a paramount way of evasion? Isn't it worse for being beautiful?

This is where we perhaps arrive at the endgame of aesthetics. What started in the 1820s with Hegel's *Aesthetics*, rather with the proclamation of an end of aesthetics, the outdatedness of art, has run its course in the 150 years to the extreme shriveling of aesthetic means, of art's content and form, the ending of its ending, the questioning of aesthetic means that become an obstacle. If Hegel saw the limitation of art precisely in its embeddedness in the sensuous aesthetic setting, then this very medium turns against itself through its utter reduction by the supreme mastery, a mastery undermining itself—so that the worst, the best, something or nothing, can seep through. Beckett's *Worstward Ho* can stand as its token, a most telling one.

Are we heading for the best? Are we heading for the worst? Is there but a minimal difference between the two? Where are we heading?

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