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**The Impossible Nihilist Enterprise  
in Samuel Beckett's Last Short  
Prose and *what is the word***

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## ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett's last works have been noted as a movement towards linguistic minimalism. An interesting, yet often overlooked reasoning behind this progression is the attempt to reach an idealized, as well as impossible, expression of nihilism. Moreover, previous analyses surrounding Beckettian nihilism have failed to provide a defined account to the strategies Beckett employs towards this goal, and have mostly focused on earlier works by the author. In this BA thesis I will attempt to explain how Beckett seeks to reach this impossible form of nihilism through the organic construction of a literary work that mimics a living being and its progressive degradation down to its last atom — i.e. the word— followed by its annihilation in the Beckettian *unword*, the hypothesized nihilistic element that is to simultaneously recreate Beckettian *nothing*. I will also attempt to interpret the strategies Beckett employs to this effect, and the obstacles that render it impossible. This thesis mainly focuses on Beckett's last works of short prose, but will conclude with his last work, the poem *what is the word?*

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, *Nothing*, Void, *Unword*

## RESUMEN

Las últimas obras de Samuel Beckett se consideran una evolución hacia un minimalismo lingüístico. Aun frecuentemente olvidada, una explicación interesante para esta progresión es el intento de alcanzar una expresión idealizada, a la par que imposible, del nihilismo. A esto se añade que previos análisis del nihilismo beckettiano no han proporcionado una explicación detallada de las estrategias que Beckett emplea a este fin. En este Trabajo de Fin de Grado trataré de explicar cómo Beckett intenta alcanzar este nihilismo imposible a través de la construcción orgánica de una obra literaria que imita a un ser vivo y la degradación progresiva de ésta hasta su último átomo —la palabra— sucedida de una aniquilación mitificada en la *despalabra*, elemento hipotetizado por Beckett que simultáneamente conduciría hacia, y recrearía, la nada beckettiana. Trataré también de interpretar las estrategias que Beckett emplea para este fin, además de los obstáculos que lo imposibilitan. Este TFG se centra principalmente en las últimas obras de prosa corta de Beckett, si bien concluirá con su última obra, el poema *what is the word*.

Palabras Clave: Samuel Beckett, *Nada*, Vacío, *Despalabra*



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## Introduction

For almost a century, Samuel Beckett's works have been the source of much debate. Innumerable analyses have been written, providing a wide array of interpretations. Beckett's nihilist facet, though explicitly expressed by the author himself (1984, 51), has not received such attention, and has rarely been observed by itself when considered, often explored as ancillary to the existentialist aspect. In turn, Beckett's short prose is, together with his poetry, the least analysed genre from the author, the focus of scholarly works being typically directed at his longer prose (composed of novellas and novels) and his drama. Within his short prose, his last works, deemed to be some of the most radical and ambiguous examples of his work, are undoubtedly the least explored and, even when they are analysed, the matter of nihilism remains virtually untouched.

Beckett's works are typically divided into three stages: an early period for his first works, which are greatly influenced by the style from mentor James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*; a middle period, marking the departure from Joycean influence; and a late period, characterised by a heavy drive for minimalism and abstraction.

For the periodisation of Beckett's works, this BA thesis employs Dirk van Hulle and Mike Kestemon's stylochronometric division (i.e. a periodisation based on the computer-assisted analysis of a particular author style) on the English works and English translations from their article *Periodizing Samuel Beckett's Works: A Stylochronometric Approach*, more accurate to Beckett's artistic development than the traditional historical periodisation which takes WW2 as the main dividing point. According to their study, the early, Joycean period in Beckett's works would end in 1934 with the short story collection *More Pricks than Kicks*; the middle period would span from *Murphy* (1938) to *Malone Dies* (1951); finally, the last Beckettian period would begin with the 1953 novel *The Unnamable*, leading up to his last work, the poem *what is the word* (1989).

early period -----1929 →1934

middle period ----- 1938→1951

last period----- 1953→1989

This BA thesis aims to observe how Beckett's peculiar breed of nihilism (marked primarily by its sense of impossibility) is expressed in the author's last period works, focusing primarily on his last works of short prose and concluding with his last written work, the poem *what is the word*.

The first chapter is dedicated to the definition, symbols and prior framework for *nothing*. This chapter lays the foundations of the paradoxical concept of *nothing*—which will be marked in italics to avoid confusion with other more conventional uses of the word—, offering two opposite yet complementary definitions to the concept, as well as the main symbols employed to represent it, thus corresponding with the recreational aspect of the process.

Chapter 2 revolves around the strategies Beckett employs to bring the work towards *nothing* in his late short prose, starting out with the cementing of a being-like work and then explaining the main strategies employed in its progressive annihilation, thus corresponding with the methodical aspect in the process.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to explaining the impossibility of *nothing* in terms of both the impediments that signify the impossibility of representing *nothing* and the most salient obstacles that render the progression towards *nothing* impossible, as well as a brief account of the descriptive language Beckett uses to express such impossibilities. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the last futile attempt at directing the work towards *nothing* in Beckett's last work *what is the word*.

Rather than selecting only a small number of works from Beckett's last short prose, I have decided to include a wide array of pieces from the last period, as one of the tenets for this analysis presupposes an interrelation between Beckett's works. I have chosen seven texts for my analysis: *Lessness*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Enough*, *neither*, *Faux Departs*, *Stirrings Still*, and *Ping*. In chapter 2 I also allude to works from other periods to justify that the progression in fact involves the entire Beckettian oeuvre.

As well as these works of short prose I have included the poem *what is the word* for two reasons, namely: that it is Beckett's last work ever written, and that it is a salient example of the clash between strategies aimed at reaching and recreating *nothing* and of the dissuading impossibilities to the endeavour.



## State of the Art

This BA thesis is inspired by a variety of academic writings revolving around three predominant matters: Beckett's nihilism, the impossibility of such nihilism, and Beckett's last written short prose. Shane Weller's essay "'Gnawing to Be Naught": Beckett and Pre-Socratic Nihilism" (2008) highlights the importance of nihilism in Beckett's works and explores Beckett's main inspirations that contribute to his own view on the philosophy. Marcin Tereszewski's book *The Aesthetics of Failure: Inexpressibility in Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (2013) provides an insightful look into Beckett's fixation with impossibility, while also suggesting that the ultimate goal is to bring the work towards *nothing*. Finally, Susan Brienza offers an in-depth analysis of Beckett's works of short prose from his late period in her book *Samuel Beckett's New Worlds: Style in Metafiction* (1987), combining a nihilist and existential perspective, albeit leaning substantially more on the latter.



## Chapter 1: The Foundations for the Quest for Nothing

In an early correspondence with French author George Duthuit, Beckett bemoaned the predominant spirit of possibility and amplitude found in Modernist art (Beckett & Duthuit 102-103). He felt that the optimism of the times, which he initially embraced as Joyce's literary disciple, had become clichéd (102), and yearned for a different art form, “turning from it [the possible] in disgust (...), weary of pretending to be able”, conceiving the leitmotif of this art as “[t]he expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with an obligation to express” (103).

This sentiment perfectly summarises the aim and trajectory of Beckett the nihilist: to embark on the impossible quest towards absolute *nothing*, absolute absence, always paradoxically impeded by a certain necessity to express within this vacuum, essentially embodying a diametrically opposed art form to that of his contemporaries at the time. Yet this novel approach to art implies a set of conditions for its realisation. The artist would first need to create the conditions for *nothing* that will surround that being— that is, defining what *nothing* entails and how to achieve it—. They would also be tasked with the creation of a being that expresses, something that Beckett would extend to the notion of a cohesive work in what can be effectively called a living oeuvre. Lastly, the artist would need to introduce the element of impossibility, a set of obstacles to this quest for *nothing*.

### Defining *Nothing*

If Beckett's intentions are those of creating a state of impossibility of *nothing* within the confines of *nothing*, the first question to be asked is: what is, according to Beckett, *nothing*? Beckett conceives the word in two diametrically opposite ways.

The first of such definitions is the more conventional notion of *nothing* as a negation or absence of something, a ‘no-thing’, as suggested in Beckett's emphasis on negation — “*nothing* with which to express, *nothing* from which to express, *no* power to express, *no* desire to express” (103; emphasis mine)—. This definition is apparent in, but

not limited to, Beckett's use of negation throughout his works. An illustrative example can be found in *All Strange Away* (1976): "Five foot square, six high, *no* way in, *none* out, try for him there. (...) Light off and let him be, on the stool, talking to himself in the last person, murmuring, *no* sound" (165; emphasis mine).

A second, more obscure conception of *nothing* can be found in a 1967 letter: "If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work, my points of departure would be the "*Naught is more real ... [than nothing]*" and the 'Ubi nihil vales...' both already in Murphy and neither very rational." (Beckett 1984, 51; emphasis mine). Here, Beckett's first quote derives from the Presocratic philosopher Democritus, whose relationship with *nothing*, referred to by Democritus as the 'void', will be heavily influential on Beckett's nihilist enterprise. In his book, *The Aesthetics of Failure: Inexpressibility in Samuel Beckett's Fiction*, Marcin Tereszewski elucidates on the relationship between the author and the philosopher, defining the Democritean void as a condition for all things:

For Democritus the void was understood as a necessary place for atoms to exist and be in motion, and thus the void, no longer conceptualized as nothingness, began to function as space; that is, as a constitutive condition for being to exist. "Naught is more real than nothing", because without the void as space there would be no atoms, no tangible being.  
(13)

Consequently, if we were to take into account both definitions in conjunction, *nothing* becomes paradoxically a condition of absolute absence (a no-thing) and the condition for all possibilities (a void).

### Naming Nothing: Beckett's Main Symbols for Nothing

Having defined *nothing*, the following step would be to proceed to observe how *nothing* is portrayed. In the short prose from his last period (1953-1989), Beckett offers us a variety of approximate stand-ins for the concept. All these symbols are of a simple archetypal nature and bear a direct relationship with no-thing and the void in their implicit contradictory nature.

Whiteness, one of Beckett's most important symbols, is a great example of this, as white is an absence of colour, but it is also the reflection of all colours combined. Whiteness as a symbol is recurrent in Beckett's last works of short prose, most notably *Ping* (1967), where it is the most frequently used word, appearing 91 times in the 962-word-long piece of short prose. The association between whiteness and *nothing* is by no means a Beckettian invention and is in fact a direct borrowing from Mallarmé. In *Beckett's Library*, Van Hulle and Nixon note how Beckett often annotated quotes from the French Symbolist, one of his quotes reading "la clarté déserte de ma lampe sur le vide papier que la blancheur defend" (63), which literally translates as 'the deserted light of my lamp on the empty paper that the whiteness defends'. This quote, which Beckett included in his last entry from one of his notebooks, the 'Sottisier' (Van Hulle 2013, 63) derives from an untitled poem by Mallarmé from *Le Brise Marine*, where we find a clear relationship between whiteness and *nothing*.

Often found together with whiteness, another important symbol of *nothing* is silence. Silence stands for an absence of sound, but also as a condition for all sound. As is the case with all of *nothing's* symbols, its elementary and archetypal nature make of it a universal symbol present throughout literary tradition. Silence is notably found in conjunction with whiteness in *Ping* as the absence of noise (presented as the onomatopoeia 'ping'); mentioned directly as the word "silence", such as in *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965): "Emptiness, silence, heat, whiteness, wait, the light goes down" (175), *Enough* (1965): "Too much silence is too much" (178), or *Lessness* (1970): "Never but silence such that in imagination this wild laughter these cries" (188); yet also present in the form of negation, such as in "soundless" in *Still 3* (1973): "Back then and nothing to tell but some soundless place" (241) or "no sound" in *All Strange Away*: "Falling on his knees in the dark to murmur, no sound" (166).

The last important symbol of *nothing* we find is stillness. Stillness is evidently a lack of movement, but also the prior condition for movement. Already present throughout his works, where we often find characters constrained to not move by physical ailments, as exemplified by Hamm, the wheelchaired invalid in Beckett's play *Endgame*, or the ubiquitous rocking chair in early Middle Period novel *Murphy* (1938), which illustrates the infinite alternation between stillness and motion (cf. Feldman 2006, 66), stillness acquires a special importance in his last works of prose, where it often becomes the main theme, even being the main titular element in Beckett's penultimate work *Stirrings Still*

(1988), *Fizzle 7: Still* (1976) and the accompanying piece published posthumously as *Still 3* (1995). The symbol's association through alternation with movement is ever present in the Beckett's late short prose, as illustrated in *Fizzle 3*'s "Ruinstrewn land, he has trodden it all night long (...) now he stops again, for the hundredth time that night say" (214). The fact that it also is referred through negation, as is the case in the use of the -lessness affixation in 'changelessness' from *Lessness* — "Never but this changelessness dream the passing hour" (189) — is also indicative of its quality as the negational no-thing.

Once more, one of Beckett's main influences for the symbol comes from a notable Presocratic philosopher, Zeno of Elea, whose paradoxes will greatly inspire the author in his artistic endeavour (Feldman 66). Zeno of Elea posited that motion was in fact non-existent, proposing a series of paradoxes to demonstrate its impossibility (Booth 201), and thus becoming an important source for Beckett's nihilist perspective.

### Vico's Cycle and the Desire for Closure

*Nothing*'s paradoxical state as an absence of things and an initial condition for things to happen allows it to be both the end of things (the negation of any existence) and the starting point for everything and anything. This cyclical condition obsessed Beckett throughout his works and stands in direct relation with his interpretation of Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico's theory on history as a cycle, from which he derives an important part of his literary cosmivision. Beckett himself describes the cycle in his essay "Bruno...Vico.Dante..Joyce" as a circle of life divided into four parts. Part I would be the stage of birth, followed by Part 2, the stage of maturity. After maturity would come death and, subsequently, burial —or corruption—, which corresponds to Part 3. The fourth and final stage, Part 4, Generation, would bring us back to the first initial stage, thus fulfilling the cycle.

Due to the nature of the cycle, the succession of these stages is neither clear-cut nor linear, resulting in their overlapping, as there is, in Beckett's words "a great deal of the unborn infant in the lifeless octogenarian, and a great deal of both in the man at the apogee of his life's curve" (1929, 8). This, however, will prove to be an obstacle to Beckett's enterprise, as *nothing*, a stage that requires absolute annihilation, is impeded by the cycle's endless recommencing. It is therefore necessary to find a way to bring closure to the cycle.

## Chapter 2: The Quest for *Nothing*

### Birth

If we consider closure to be the aim and desired conclusion of the quest for *nothing*, we first need a progression towards such end and, for this progression to exist, we need a being that may undergo such progression. This being, in turn, necessitates a sense of cohesion among the works so as to ensure a sense of stability throughout the oeuvre, resulting in each work being construed as part of a unit of works rather than an autonomous text. For the purposes of creating a consistent oeuvre, Beckett makes use of two fundamental principles: organic unity, and habit and voluntary memory, which create cohesion within and among individual works.

### *Organic Unity*

Organic unity is an age-old concept that traces back to Ancient Greece. Aristotle was the first to coin the term in his *Poetics*, asserting that an author should write a work in such a way as to “enable the work to produce its own proper pleasure with all the organic unity of a living creature” (32). Since then, the expression of such a unity has seen different variants. During the Romantic period, Samuel Taylor Coleridge notably coined the term “organic form” to refer to the harmonious and seamless interoperation of content and form, realised in such a way the work may develop naturally (Bhatnagar 128). Roughly a century later, this conception of organic unity will become even more explicit in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, one of the works which will most greatly inspire Beckett, and the source for his interpretation of organic unity. Beckett himself offers a definition for this unity in his essay “Bruno...Vico.Dante..Joyce”, an apologia for his mentor’s last work: “Here form is content, content is form. [...] His writing is not about something; it is that something itself.” (1929, 9)

Such a fusion of form and content can be clearly seen throughout Beckett’s oeuvre and becomes especially apparent in his late period prose, where almost all the works’ titles provide a theme that the form and content jointly recreate. One of the most explicit examples of this can be found in *Stirrings Still*. Bearing a title that evokes interspersion

of motion and stasis, the short text fittingly expresses a sense of stillness alternated with movement, coupled with a succession of appearances and disappearances, an opposition further enhanced using shorter sentences which provide a sense of dynamism that is countered by a sense of inactivity established through longer sentences:

First *rise* and *stand* clinging to the table. Then *sit* again. Then *rise* again and *stand* clinging to the table again. Then *go*. *Start to go*. On unseen feet *start to go*. So *slow* that only change of place to show he went. As when he *disappeared* only to *reappear* later at another place. Then *disappeared* again only to *reappear* again later at another place again. So again and again *disappeared* again only to *reappear* again later at another place again. (1995, 234; emphasis mine)

### *Habit and Voluntary Memory*

Organic unity allows for a sense of continuity and uniformity through a thematic bind, which is necessary for the work's progression towards *nothing*. However, it is not by itself sufficient in creating a wholly unified effect, as it only establishes uniformity within individual works. Habit provides the second necessary element by establishing a connection between works.

In *Manuscript Genetics*, Joyce's *Know-How*, Beckett's *Nohow*, Dirk Van Hulle points out that each individual work is "an instantiation of a work" (125), a fact that negates its standing as autonomous within the body of works. He does, however, intend this as a preclusion to the idea of an organic oeuvre — "the work is neither the *sum of its versions*, nor a single copy of the published text" (125; emphasis mine)—. Yet a work can be both a version of a work and ultimately part of it together with other versions — as part of a unifying oeuvre—, a fact which is corroborated by Beckett himself on various occasions. The most evident examples of this can be found in his essay "Proust" (1930). Here, Beckett first determines that, as particulars, we are not single indissoluble entities, but instantiations of entities, clarifying that "[w]e are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday" (1957, 3). Despite this, we are not only variations upon a same model, but also a bigger entity composed of such instantiations, or, as Beckett puts it: "the individual is a succession of individuals" (1957, 8). Simply put, we are not the same person today as we shall be



tomorrow, but those two people are still part of that bigger vessel of experience that is ourselves. This sentiment is explicitly restated in *Texts for Nothing* (1967), a collection of twelve short texts written between the late years of the middle Beckettian period and the early years of the late Beckettian period where the nameless character reveals that he is part of a group of other characters, all separate, but homogenous in desire: “we’re of one mind, all of one mind, always were, deep down, we’re fond of one another, we’re sorry for one another, but there it is, there’s nothing we can do for one another” (1995, 112-113).

In order for this bigger whole of being to comprise these smaller individual instances of being there needs to be a unifying agent. These individuals are bound together by habit, for, as Beckett states in *Proust*: “Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits” (1957, 8). One of the most important examples of habit is voluntary memory, which can be defined as the habitual act of intentional retrieval of past events in one’s memory. However, as Beckett notes, voluntary memory “presents the past in monochrome. The images it chooses are as arbitrary as those chosen by imagination” (19), resulting in a nihilist perspective of memory itself : “The material that it furnishes contains nothing of the past, merely a blurred and uniform projection once removed of our anxiety and opportunism—that is to say, nothing.” (20). Voluntary memory thus becomes the act of illusory and habitual re-piecing of a being’s identity through imagistic self-projections in the past, a phenomenon Beckett refers to as “plagiarism of oneself” (20). As a result, voluntary memory and general habit operate as the main components in the establishment of a stable and seemingly coherent sense of identity (Barry 71).

This translates into the oeuvre as a succession of works with extremely similar characters who exhibit similar habitual behavior, establishing a form of identity through intratextuality. Characters, behaviours, personality traits, words and phrases... reemerge, creating a sense of consistency. This consistency progressively deteriorates from one Beckettian period to the next, through an organic deterioration of content and form, always with some form of remnant of habit or memory.

During the final stage, the characters tend to repetitively perform extremely simplified actions such as crawling, kneeling, lying... as in 1965’s *Faux Départs 4* — “Try as well as sitting standing, walking, kneeling, crawling, lying, creeping” (1995, 243) — and *All Strange Away* (1976) — “Now he is here. Sitting, standing, walking, kneeling, crawling, lying, creeping, in the dark and in the light, try all.” (1995, 165) —.

This progressive decay not only affects the habits of the characters, but also the style of composition of the works. During the last period, there is a predominance of broken syntax and a scarcity of punctuation such as in *Fizzle 8* — “Grey cloudless sky grey sand as far as eye can see long desert to begin” (1995, 221) — or *Ping* — “Murmur only just almost never one second perhaps not alone” (1995, 184) — so much so that most of the works of short prose from this period are referred to as ‘texts’ or ‘pieces’ rather than short stories.

However, there are three examples, works *Enough* (1965), *As the Story was Told* (1987) and *One Evening* (1980), where the oeuvre is written in the more conventional style from previous stages. Out of the three, *Enough* is undoubtedly the more interesting, for not only does it explicitly show the act of voluntary memory in action, but it also exposes the compositional process itself as an act of habit. *Enough* is written in a prose reminiscent of the four *Novellas* (1977) written early in the second period, in 1946. Just like the *Novellas*, *Enough* mostly employs short and simple sentences with conventional syntax: “Contrary to what I had long been pleased to imagine he was not blind. Merely indolent. One day he halted and fumbling for his words described his vision. He concluded by saying he thought it would get no worse” (1995, 181-182).

The story is one of the most salient examples of voluntary memory, featuring references to works from the two previous Beckettian periods and offering a reflection on habit itself. One of the central themes of the short story is the journey, a motif that has appeared in previous short stories such as the novellas *First Love*, *The Expelled* and *The End*, and *From an Abandoned Work* (1957). In *Enough*, the theme establishes a strong connection between the journey motif and the action of writing, thereby establishing both as habitual acts. One of the two characters, an expression of Beckett himself, walks whenever he talks and stays silent whenever he halts: “Sooner or later his foot broke away from the flowers and we moved on. Perhaps only to halt again after a few steps. So that he might say at last what was in his heart or decide not to say it again” (1995, 180). This is a clear allusion to Beckett’s habitual compositional style, characterised by inconsistency and repeated doing and undoing, or ‘piecemealing’, as he sometimes calls it — “A takes over. Breaks down. V again. A again. So on. Till text completed piecemeal” (1995, 16) —. This piecemealing is later organically expressed through repetitive and circular sentences: “Other main examples suggest themselves to the mind. Immediate

continuous communication with immediate redeparture. Same thing with delayed redeparture” (1995, 180).

Habit thus becomes a means to establish a consistency between works that allows us to observe them not as separate instantiations but connected episodes of a bigger whole by virtue of intratextuality.

## Decomposition

Once the work ‘organism’ has been birthed, the next step is to bring it towards its death. To do so, Beckett must fulfill three conditions. He must (1) reduce the work to its bare minimum —i.e. the word— taking into consideration that such a word (2) must become sufficiently meaningful so as to carry all of the meaning of *nothing* — entailed in nothing and the void — and understanding that this meaning cannot be ultimately conveyed through the word, but (3) through its absence, as you cannot represent *nothing* through something.

In his *Manuscript Genetics*, Dirk Van Hulle uses the term ‘decomposition’ to refer to instances of progressive omission of elements in the work (words, characters...) from its successive manuscripts (2008, 162-194), i.e. an undoing of composition.

Given that the word ‘decomposition’ also fits with the organic set of metaphors used thus far in relation to the work, Van Hulle even employing the word decomposition with its second, more physical meaning of rotting — “Beckett amassed a huge amount of notes and kept decomposing them in an analytical way, allowing them to putrefy” (2008, 173) —, I shall both borrow this term in the primary sense that Van Hulle intended, that is, as a progression towards nothing within individual works —i.e., decomposition of the work—, and employ it in the sense of a general progression of the organism-like bulk of works towards nothing, —i.e., decomposition of the oeuvre—.

As a process, decomposition takes on a variety of strategies that interoperate towards Beckett’s impossible nihilist goal. As such, to understand Beckett’s undertaking it is necessary to comprehend the main strategies of decomposition he employs.

## *Abstraction, Subtraction, Lessness and Repetition*

To bring the work towards *nothing*, the work's elements must be first broken down to their bare essentials. Beckett sought to do this by a combined use of what Theodore Adorno refers to as “abstraction” and “subtraction” (2010, 170).

Abstraction can be defined as the extraction of the essential constituents of something by means of filtering out those elements that are incidental or particular to it. The issue arises when we consider that abstraction never reaches such essence, and thus ultimately sheds the properties of the object *ad absurdum* when taken to its logical conclusion (170-171). As such, the process of abstraction becomes a process of “acknowledged subtraction” (170), a progressive reduction towards *nothing*.

During Beckett's final period, this process of subtraction through abstraction is most notably observed in his use of non-descript characters, who are for the most part reduced to anatomical features, their behaviour restricted to basic motions. One of the most paramount examples of this de-compositional process can be found in “Diagram”, a section from *All Strange Away*:

Arms and hands as before for the moment. Rotunda then two foot across and at its highest two foot high, full glare, face on left cheek at a, long black hair gone, long black lashes on white cheekbone gone, glare from above for features on this bone-white undoubted face right profile still hungering for missing lashes burning down for commissure of lids at least when like say without hesitation hell gaping they part and the black eye appears (1995, 71)

This method is most often coupled with another pair of strategies which relate to word type number and word type frequency: the former shall be referred to as ‘lessness’, in reference to Beckett's late short text *Lessness*, while the latter shall be simply called ‘repetition’. Lessness involves the reduction of word types — i.e. variety of words within a text —, which is conducive to the repetition of these words. *Lessness*, for instance, is a 1540-word-long text, composed of only 168 word types, with the words “grey”, “no”, and “body” appearing 52, 36, and 30 times respectively. Undoubtedly, however, the most extreme example of this phenomenon is *Ping*. Throughout the 962 words that compose

the short text, there are 122 word types (including functional words such as “as” and “by”), the word *white* appearing 91 times. The lessness-repetition combination creates a feeling of encroachment, as the sentences are closed in on by the repeated words:

Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white. Legs joined like  
sewn heels together right angle. Traces alone uncover given black light  
grey almost white on white. Light heat white walls shining white one  
yard by two. Bare white body fixed one yard ping fixed elsewhere.  
Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white. (1995, 184)

### *Closed Spaces and Open Spaces*

Together with the decomposition of the oeuvre in terms of form and content comes a need to do away with the setting. The ever-reducing formal structures in Beckett’s late short prose are often coupled with the use of settings that seem to be closing in on the characters, becoming gradually reduced. An extreme example of this can be found in *All Strange Away*, where the setting for the being, at first abstracted as a cube — “So far then hollow cube three foot overall, no way in imagined yet, none out” (1995, 168) —, then as a round space — “Cease here from face a space to note how place no longer cube but rotunda” (170) —, becomes smaller, starting out at “five foot square, *six* high” (165), and ending at the absurdly small “two foot across and at its highest two foot high” (171). Another such example can be found in *Ping*, where the encroachment of *white* over the setting is complemented with an incredibly narrow space: “White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen” (1995, 184).

Space encroachment might be the most striking strategy relating to settings, yet, paradoxically, the second most common settings to be found are completely open fields. This contradiction can be accounted for by the dual nature of *nothing*. Closed spaces make us feel the encroaching emptiness; vast fields, the vastness of the void. The two most notable examples of open spaces can be found in the settings in *Lessness* and *The Cliff* (1975).

The main setting in *Lessness* is that of a fusion of the earth and sky — “No sound no stir ash grey sky mirrored earth mirrored sky” (1995, 189) —, coupled with the view of what appears to be a never-ending desert — “In the sand no hold one step more in the

endlessness he will make it” (189) —. The open space’s amplitude is reinforced using the word “endlessness”, in a twist to the negational notion of *lessness*, which is no longer solely an act of lessening towards an absence of things, but also a suffix that allows for the contradictory duality of *nothing* in the word by expressing amplitude, infinitude. Cumulatively, *nothing* as a negation of sound and stirring is combined with *nothing* as an open space (void) of compenetrated sky and earth in this *endlessness*: “All sides endlessness earth sky as one no sound no stir” (187).

An even clearer instance of open space can be found in the extremely short *The Cliff*, where the earth-sky motif is even more explicit. The title itself evoking an open landscape, *The Cliff* offers us a picture of a window between the earth and the sky “[o]pening on a colourless cliff”, of such grandeur that its “crest escapes the eye wherever set” (1995, 232). We are also told that “[t]he base [escapes the eye] as well” (232) and is cornered completely by a sky of absolute whiteness, “[f]ramed by two sections of sky forever white” (232).

### *Contradictions, Absence and Chained Symbols: A Game of Associations*

One of the most notable elements in Beckett is undoubtedly his use of contradiction. The existence of oppositions in the Beckettian oeuvre is by no means merely aesthetic, but also strategic, Beckett employing them for two distinct purposes.

Firstly, Beckett considers contradiction as a means of dissolution, and thus a necessary element towards the death of the work, praising Joyce for the dissolutive qualities that his works acquire thanks to contradiction (Beckett 2011, 537)

Secondly, contradictions are also a necessary part of Vico’s cycle, as they are necessary components for the eternal cyclical succession of elements. Lightness and darkness, motion and stasis, man and woman... all become crucial oppositions for the circular recursiveness that governs the Beckettian literary cosmos.

Unsurprisingly, the oppositions Beckett uses are not his own. Most of them seem to stem from Presocratic philosopher Pythagoras, such as one versus many, male versus female, or light versus darkness (Feldman 71-72). Examples of such contradictions are to

be found all throughout Beckett's works and are especially prevalent in Beckett's short prose.

The opposition man versus woman, most notably found in *Enough*, is reminiscent of the man and woman relationship found in *First Love* and its abstracted, decomposed equivalent M versus W (the initials that Beckett uses in late works to refer to man and woman) found in works such as Beckett's penultimate novel *Company*.

Light and darkness, in turn, perhaps the most ubiquitous opposition in Beckett's late short prose, features in a variety of texts, such as *neither* — "To and fro in *shadow* from inner to *outershadow* / from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither / as between two *lit* refuges" (1995, 233; emphasis mine) —, or, even more explicitly, *All Strange Away*: "Light out, long dark, candle and matches, imagine them, strike one to light, light on, blow out, light out, strike another, light on, so on. Light out, strike one to light, light on, light all the same, candlelight in light, blow out, light out, so on" (1995, 165-166).

The reiterative quality of these contradictions generates a sense of cohesion (thus contributing to the organic unity and form) while also bulwarking the importance of the opposition. In fact, by constantly connecting opposites, Beckett primes the reader to identify contraries. This becomes especially useful when applied to another of Beckett's strategies: absence. An ingenious strategy that Beckett mostly employs in his last works, absence involves a game of association, often by means of relating the present element with the absent opposite. In *The Making of Samuel Beckett's Stirrings Still / Soubresauts and Comment dire / what is the word*, Van Hulle points out an instance of absence in *Stirring Still*, where the deleted *nightlight* (which involves the two contradictory themes of darkness and light and synthesizes them) is present-though-absent by means of internal rhyme:

The 'nightlight' was deleted in the typescript (...), and changed into the more abstract phrase 'The night his light went out'. (...) Somehow the original 'nightlight' still glimmers through the final version of the first paragraph because of the internal rhymes, causing a repetitive alternation of 'night' and 'light', leading to the last word 'out':

Its faint unchanging light unlike any light he could remember  
from the days and nights when day followed hard on night and

night on day. This outer light then when his own went out became his only light till it in its turn went out and left him in the dark. Till it in its turn went out. (Beckett 2009a, 107; emphasis added)

(2011, 83)

The title in *Ping* is another great example of this. Here we find the opposite of silence, “ping”, which stands as the onomatopoeia for noise. We also find a direct relationship between whiteness and silence in the piece — “Head haught eyes light blue almost white silence within” (1995, 27) — and therefore whiteness becomes indirectly associated with Ping through silence. This indirect relationship is backed by absence and identification of contraries. Beckett’s constant playing with contraries primes us to see silence in Ping, while the predominance of whiteness and its association with silence as a symbol of *nothing* force us to see ‘white’ as that which underlies Ping. As a matter of fact, the original title for the short story in French was meant to be ‘Blanc’ —meaning white— but was later changed to ‘Bing’, and later became ‘Ping’ in the English translation (Parrot 79). By hiding words that are present by association, Beckett represents the elusive nature of *nothing*’s hidden-yet-present essence.

As a result of the process, Beckett not only creates an association between the opposites Ping and silence and the now oppositional Ping and whiteness, but also establishes a stronger bond between silence and whiteness. This chain of symbols also incorporates stillness into the equation, most notably in *Fizzle 7: Still*, where the symbol becomes associated with silence — and, by association, whiteness —, as Brienza points out: “the word ‘still’ can mean no movement, no change over time, or no sound (a triple association Beckett exploits in “Still”, Fizzle 7) the hero’s love of stasis translates into the quest for silence, for an end to writing” (54). This stringing in and of itself is undoubtedly strategic, as it reinforces the symbolic effect of each of the words by creating a symbolic web, while serving as an implicit statement that *nothing* is not simply silence or whiteness or stillness but all of the above, and possibly more.



## Chapter 3: The Impossibility of Nothing

*The end is in the beginning and yet you go on.*  
(Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*)

Beckett always knew that the quest for *nothing* was doomed to fail from the start. This, however, did not dissuade him from continuing to write towards an acknowledged contradictory conclusion. As the narrator in Beckett's novella *Worstward Ho* (1983) famously states: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (1991, 101). To understand this sentiment, we must observe how such an impossibility is framed, as well as the hurdles that Beckett envisioned to his quest.

Much like he uses linguistic symbols in an attempt to recreate *nothing*, Beckett employs a particular language to express the impossibility of the quest. Moreover, he displays a set of obstacles to the progression towards *nothing*, which I shall refer to as 'methodical impossibilities', as well as obstacles relating to the recreation of *nothing* through symbols and names, which I shall call 'recreational *nothing*'. Both of these impossibilities ultimately meet at the word, which is the highest point of subtraction before *nothing*, as well as the smallest recreational unit that precedes the much-sought absence. Unsurprisingly, Beckett's last work, the aptly titled *what is the word* — which shall be the main focus of this chapter — is his most salient attempt at reaching and recreating *nothing*.

### The Language of Futility and Useless Hope

In a letter from the third of February 1959, Beckett wrote: "I have given up all thought of theatre and radio and am struggling to struggle on from where the Unnamable left me off, that is with the next next to nothing" (2014, 194). This "next next to nothing" is a clear expression of the frustrating quality of *nothing*, paradoxically close and far, surrounding us as the very condition of things, yet hidden. This 'tantalising' language — as I shall refer to it from now — lies at the very core of Beckett's late short prose and is expressed in a few ways.

Oftentimes, Beckett employs lexicon and phraseology relating to distances. *The Cliff* is a good example of this. We are presented with a window separating the observer from an open space *nothing*: "Window between sky and earth nowhere known" (1995,

232). We cannot view *nothing* directly, but from this window: “The *crest escapes the eye* wherever set. The base as well” (1995, 232; emphasis mine), as the voice in the story asks whether there is “[a]ny *hint* in the sky at a land’s end? The *yonder ether*?” (232; emphasis mine).

Other times, it is articulated in words that relate what is not fully perceived. The incredibly short *neither* (1979) offers a great example of this facet. The text’s theme revolves around searching for *nothing* among contraries — *nothing* here is vaguely called *neither* —. There is a motion “to and fro”, “from inner to outershadown” “from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself” all sourced in *nothing*: “by way of neither” (1995, 233). The frustration elicited by this elusive source is expressed as two doors that alternate from being closed and ajar, faintly revealing a light: “as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close, once turned away from gently part again beckoned back and forth and turned away” (233). The protagonist does not know where to turn, debating over both faint lights: “heedless of the way, intent on the one *gleam* or the other” (233; emphasis mine).

At times we are met not with the partly hopeful tantalising language, but a language that admits complete futility. Such is the case in *Lessness*, where the word ‘endless’ is used not only to indicate the endless vastness of the void, but also the endlessness of the cycle, and, therefore, the impossibility of reaching *nothing*: “In the sand no hold one step more in the endlessness he will make it” (1955, 187).

### Methodical and Recreational Impossibilities

As it is framed, the quest for *nothing* is destined to fail due to its methodical and representational issues. The methodical progression that Beckett follows is hindered by two fundamental facts: a desire and impetus to move towards closure, and Vico’s cycle as the trajectory for such movement. The work’s desire and attempts at closure are paradoxically expressed in a futile attempt to continue searching for an ending, while consequently endlessly continuing the journey. As the narrator from *The Unnamable* states: “The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue” (2010, 38). This is further expressed in the notion of the cycle, as the journey always returns to the starting point.

This theme is notably explored in the tellingly titled *Texts for Nothing*. As Brienza points out, the texts' aim is to go towards the end, offering a false sense of closure in a collection of stories whose progression is in fact circular:

*Texts for Nothing*, if graphed, might appear as a curve from some negative number to some negative minuscule fraction approaching zero, but its structure is obviously circular as well. A return to one's starting point accomplishes "nothing", and Beckett has stylistically managed to "go on" and to go nowhere simultaneously. (33)

In turn, the recreational aspect of *nothing* also becomes a fruitless endeavour, as we are confronted with a linguistic impossibility. Futility of doing so is stated, for instance, in *Stirrings Still*, where the narrator flounders to reach a word that may represent *nothing* through a more apposite variant of stillness:

Was he then now to press on regardless now in one direction and now in another or on the other hand *stir no more* as the case might be that is as that *missing word* might be which if to warn such as sad or bad for example then of course in spite of all the one and if the reverse then of course the other that is *stir no more*. (1995, 23; emphasis mine)

Despite how apparent it becomes that these attempts at naming *nothing* are futile, the path towards closure and the naming of *nothing* meets at the word. It is the word what aptly closes the work, a sentiment that was already shared by Beckett's mentor Joyce when attempting to find what Beckett refers to as the "nichwort" or 'non-word' (Van Hulle 2008, 118), albeit from an opposite perspective, that of Modernist omnipotence, and consequently employing a different approach. Much like Beckett, Joyce recognized how words cannot represent *nothing*. However, he viewed the problem as one regarding pre-existing words and conceived the solution as creating another one of his famed portmanteaus, joining the words 'word' and 'void': "The only way to become one with 'Vernichtung' is by means of the so-called 'Nichtwort'. 'Silence' (FW 501.07) is not good enough, for 'silence is still a word'... So Joyce coined his own 'Nichwort': the 'woid'" (Van Hulle 2008, 118-119).

Joyce's relationship with *nothing* would suggest an attempt at recreating the void, and, therefore, a beginning of beginnings. As stated in *Finnegans Wake*: "in the beginning was the woid" (378). The issue would be that he would still have to recognise no-thing as an integral part of *nothing*, and 'woid', despite being a portmanteau, is still very much a word, and therefore not no-thing.

Conversely, Beckett's quest for no-thing in *nothing* would suggest that the void impedes true closure (i.e. the ending of endings), seeing as the void is the point of recommencement that impedes 'vernichtung'. Yet it is still an essential aspect of *nothing* that Beckett had to recognise, just like Joyce was forced to recognise no-thing as an essential part of *nothing*. As previously suggested, therein lies the necessity to express the absence of a space for all possibility that drove Beckett to employ most of his associative strategies, all to no avail, as the impossible 'unword' is just as unable to truly cover the absence of the void as the 'woid' is in recreating no-thing as a possibility within the all-possible void.

This literature of the 'unword' revolves around the idea that the word should in fact recreate *nothing* by means of the absence it conceals — i.e. that which lies behind the word and must be 'bored' —, having first accrued its potential meaning by associative strategies, therefore being at once an absence — negational *nothing* — and the void — omnipotent *nothing* —, yet being so organically in order to account for the absence of the being it has annihilated progressively and systematically.

This quest that involves a paradoxical accumulation and reduction would end with the last hurdle, the word, which will have accrued such an inflation of meaning so as to become both all-meaning and meaningless, a veritable woid to be destroyed. The following fragment taken from Text 8 of *Texts for Nothing* is telling of this, even bringing in the notion of the void's hindering endlessness: "it's for ever the same murmur, flowing unbroken, like a single endless word and therefore meaningless, for it's the end gives the meaning to words" (1995, 136).

The search for this impossible missing (un)word reaches its heights in Beckett's last written work: *what is the word*.

*what is the word*

Written on the same year of Beckett's death, *what is the word* (1989) condenses extreme expressions of nihilist strategies together with facets of impossibility into a short 176-word poem. After *Ping*, it is the second most radical example of lessness, featuring a variety of only 24 word types, including functional words 'the', 'for' and 'and'.

However, the first striking element to be found in the poem is the use of hyphens. Beckett tellingly refers to hyphens as "traits de désunion" (Van Hulle 2011, 102), which literally translates as 'features of disunity', instead of the actual French term 'traits de union', which literally reads as 'features of unity'. These hyphens indicate that there is something missing, the word that will provide closure. Their appearance at the end of each line expresses the unfinished effect that is typical of an enjambment:

folly –  
folly for to –  
for to –  
what is the word –  
folly from this – (2009, 152)

This combined use of hyphenation strategically localised at the enjambments and unfinished phrases is in fact a radical attempt at representing *nothing* through evident absence, the word that Beckett is grasping for being frustratingly present through its absence.

The despairing effect of the so-close-yet-so-far *nothing* is heightened by extensive use of half language, which is only scarcely counterpointed by a more hopeful tone. The hopeful "see" (see –), often even appearing in the bare gerund form "seeing" ("seeing – | folly seeing all this – | [...] seeing all this –"), is counterpointed by the less optimistic "glimpses": "glimpse – | seem to glimpse –" (152), translating the close-yet-far sentiment to the sensorial in a more explicit manner.

In turn, the hopeful space deictic "here" which points at *nothing*'s proximity, at one point even coupled with the two proximal demonstrative "this" for emphasis ("this this here –" (153) is counterpointed by the frustrating half language "there" as well as the even more distant "afar" "away" and "over there", which cumulatively become the ever

so distant “afar away over there –” (153). In the manuscripts we even find a further distancing in “au delà”, the impossible distance of *nothing*, which Van Hulle points out to be an admission of the impossibility of speaking of what is beyond experience (i.e., *nothing*):

It is remarkable that Beckett simultaneously crossed out the words ‘au delà’. Beckett does not cease to look for the limits of the empirical, but he refuses to go beyond; postulating an hereafter or speculating about a great beyond (‘au delà’) would only be a bogus solution (2011, 103)

The enterprise involves a further, more pessimistic activity as Beckett embeds more structures relating to futility:

*glimpse* -  
seem to *glimpse* -  
need to *seem to glimpse* -  
folly for to *need to seem to glimpse* – (153; emphasis mine)

These cumulative structures resemble the writings and rewritings in Beckett’s manuscripts, yet instead of being hidden they are part of the final version, as is illustrated in the following example of a manuscript draft from *Stirrings Still* containing Beckett’s corrections: “ ‘Head on hands <sup>half hoping</sup> <sup>half fearing</sup> when he disappears again that that he ~~will~~ <sup>may will</sup> may will not reappear again’ ” (Van Hulle 2011, 81). In this peculiar strategy we find the emergence of the omitted, as if Beckett were displaying hitherto absent compositive elements, and therefore bridging a gap between the hidden words from the manuscripts and those appearing in the final draft, seemingly establishing another word association game between what is absent and what is present, the ‘unword’ and the word. This process culminates in the antepenultimate verse with an embedding of all prior words relating to futility “folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what-” (153)

The poem rather fittingly ends with the words “what is the word”, not only a statement of the impossibility of grasping *nothing*, but also, as Van Hulle points out in *The Making of Samuel Beckett’s Stirrings Still / Soubresauts and Comment dire / what is the word*, a reference to Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, thus bearing a subsequent

inconclusiveness by consolidating the endless cycle through a referential return to a work that itself bears a cyclical structure:

In the English translation the succession of 'afaint afar away' may be read as a reference to the work that marked the start of Beckett's literary career: James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, ending in the middle of the sentence: 'A way a lone a last a loved a long the'; but whereas Joyce's closing words reconnect with the opening word 'riverrun', Beckett's work ends 'in progress' with an unfinished sentence and the words 'comment dire' or 'what is the word'. (19)

The self-fulfilling prophecy of Beckett's impossible nihilism becomes true as Beckett's last work mirrors that of his mentor, thus signifying a return to Joyce after the long departure. As such, the quest offers no closure, merely an endless progression in circles, and ultimately demonstrates the impossibility of reaching *nothing*.





## Conclusions

The main aim of this BA thesis has been to observe Beckettian nihilism in isolation to extract its main characteristics and expressions, with special regards to his most neglected works, i.e. his late short prose. The analysis has shown to be fruitful, proving that Beckett's nihilism is doubtlessly a source of great information to better understand the complicated web of ideas entailed in his works, as well as a fundamental, if not *the* fundamental, piece of the puzzle to interpret his late works of short prose. The main strategies used to this effect have also been expounded, as have the main obstacles that preclude the quest, offering a more detailed account of these devices that hitherto have only been observed either superficially or separately.

Focusing on the nihilist point of view has enabled the establishment of a methodological framework to better understand what it is that Beckett expresses in his work, why he undertakes this endeavor and how he decides to express this vision in his works, the latter being the main focus of this BA thesis. The *what* of the matter has been described as a nihilist enterprise with no possibility of success, defining *nothing* through the Beckettian lens as a dual-natured concept of the all-possible void and the complete absence that is no-thing. The *why* of the matter has been briefly presented as a nihilist attempt itself motivated by a rejection of the Modernist obsession with the vision of the all-capable artist, a clash ultimately symbolized in his utter divergence from Joyce, expressed in the opposing Joycean *void* and Beckettian *unword*. As to how this was executed, I have described the main strategies that are employed in trying to represent and bring the work to *nothing* and have introduced and describing the main hurdles to the attempt.

All in all, this focus has allowed me to analyse the methods that Beckett employs in a more systematic and particularised manner. This holds especially true when considering that many of the strategies discussed in this BA thesis, such as absence, organic unity or habit, are most often mentioned in passing in scholarly works, and almost always incidentally, their *raison d'être* rarely ever discussed and the way in which they are expressed only briefly noted.

However, an exclusively nihilist perspective comes with evident issues. Among these the most notable regards the matter of the work-organism — conceived as an oeuvre resulting from organic unity and habit —. Though a useful resource that offers insight on the expression of Beckett's literary vision, the organic work is an abstraction that necessitates a detachment from the vital existential issues that shape the work-organism as a complicated expression of Beckett as a human being. It is hard to deny that existentialism plays a vital role in Beckett's works, the nihilist quest being inevitably tied to it. These issues, which relate to the traditional observation of expressions of the author's mind, consciousness, and sense of identity, have not been explored, predominantly due to word limitations, and for the sake of thoroughly exploring nihilism in-and-of-itself.

Despite this necessary blind spot, by focusing solely on the matter of nihilism this thesis provides a different starting point that may allow for different interpretations within the points of view that it has excluded. Some of the questions that may arise include the diverse meanings of death-closure, as of now observed as an abstract desirable outcome, in relation to other perspectives, such as the existential or the absurdist. The work-organism abstraction has also allowed us to contemplate the framework behind the existentialist elements that appear throughout Beckett's works, and therefore allows us to clearly see some of the strategies — i.e. habit and organicism — that buttress these human expressions by emulating life through the work itself.

More exhaustive investigation should also be carried out in relation to the progressive deterioration of works throughout eras. Such a progression should be considered as a potential alternative (or even as complementary) to the perspective on works as manifestations of a same model, opening the possibility for a large-scale analysis of all works by Beckett — potentially including all genres— where the bulk of his works are interpreted as a single set of works bound by a common goal to reach the impossible *nothing*.

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