

SLAWOMIR MASŁOŃ

STATING THE OBVIOUS:

Celan
Beckett
Nauman

Wydawnictwo
Uniwersytetu Śląskiego

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STANTON

THE

COMICS

**Stating the Obvious:
Celan – Beckett – Nauman**

For Joanna Szymańska and Andrzej Przywara



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Sławomir Masłoń

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Introduction

In his *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton writes that people read books because it is pleasurable. This, from a certain perspective, may be considered to be an obvious statement. Yet this formulation, in all its perversity (it is definitely not a declaration of innocence), is clearly making up for a more fundamental evasion which is never addressed directly. Making the point that literature is “any kind of writing that for some reason or another somebody values highly” (specifying later that it is not just a matter of personal taste but general valuation, and, because of that, a question of the prevailing ideology),¹ Eagleton also has to claim that at a particular time literature is assigned a particular task by a given community, a task that may change with a shift of a paradigm but which is specific and traceable notwithstanding. Therefore, if we speak in “essentialist” terms, the question “what is literature?” cannot be answered because – since “literature” is an empty term – the question has no meaning. (This is, of course, what Eagleton is aiming at: “What Is Literature?” is the title of the introduction from which the above quotation is taken.) But if this question makes no sense, there is another one that does, within the same framework: what is (the task or meaning of) literature, or more generally art, *today*? Surely, one cannot see Eagleton agreeing that it is to provide the general public with ever new ways of diversion (although there is a certain species of Marxist critic which seems to be quite satisfied with that). After all, this is more than adequately done by all the new technologies that seem to be ousting less conventional messages from the contemporary scene of information processing. There is no denying than the question just asked is difficult, even painful, but this makes it only more urgent and important. To be sure, the discussion that would do full justice to this topic would require a separate work (a very thick one, undoubtedly) and the introduction to a less ambitious piece of criticism is not the place to undertake such a task, but nevertheless these matters have to be briefly addressed because they are of consequence to our further progress.

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 9, 11.

8 The first matter that comes to mind, to stay with Eagleton for now and bearing in mind the authors who are going to be discussed in our work, is a kind of reversal of his original proposition: why is contemporary art (worth its name) “unpleasurable,” that is, why is it so difficult? Why does it pose sometimes intractable problems for understanding and appropriation?

This question brings within the compass of our perspective the complaint voiced in some quarters that there are no more great works of the kind that used to conjure up marvellous worlds of their own, a complaint which is very often accompanied by general hostility to and incomprehension of the practices of contemporary artists (which perhaps results from the refusal to pay any due attention to their work). In short, we come across the whole thematics of the degeneration of art, or its “end.” Leaving aside, for now, the question of the pertinence of such accusations (and they are not completely out of place – as one of the *proponents* of the difficult in art famously stated: “All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage”²), first, we have to note that the discourse of the end or exhaustion of art has a very long and respectable history indeed.

We can start with Kant, who speaks about the boundary of art, “a point at which art must come to a halt, as there is a limit imposed upon it which it cannot transcend. This limit has in all probability been long since attained.”³ After that we arrive at the famous Hegelian remark: “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.”⁴ What is meant by this formulation, as it is only too-well known, is that art as an inferior manifestation of the true is superseded by the proper incarnation of the Idea or Spirit which is Hegel’s philosophy. It is this understanding of art (and not necessarily as inferior to philosophy) that conveniently sums up the whole history of western thinking about it (if “western art” is not a redundant expression) from Plato to Heidegger: art as the sensible presentation of the Idea. Yet, in saying “thinking” we do not only mean thinking “proper,” that is, philosophy, but any kind of aesthetic view voiced very often with manifest counter-philosophical purpose – all ideas of art as emotional communication or inspired intoxication find their place within the Hegelian concept. This is possible because the Idea is not the intellectual Idea.

It is neither the ideat (or product) of a notion, nor the ideal of a projection. Rather, the Idea is the gathering in itself and for itself of the determinations of being (to go quickly, we can also call it truth, sense, subject, being itself). The Idea is the presentation to itself of being or the thing. It is thus its inter-

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 367.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicolas Walker, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 138.

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I, p. 11.

nal conformation and its visibility, or in other words, it is the thing itself as vision/envisioned [*en tant que vue*], where, in French, the word *vue* is taken both as noun (the thing as a visible form) and as adjective (the thing *seen*, *envisioned*, grasped in its form, but from within itself or its essence).⁵

In this sense, art is the *techne mimetike* of the Idea; it makes its ideal intelligibility (Plato's *eidos*) available for the senses – the invisible Form imitates itself as visible. And it is here that the crux of the matter in the discourse of the degradation of art rests: *the world of the Idea is no longer ours*. Yet it is very difficult to change one's deeply ingrained habits. The defunct habit of art is precisely the art of a “great form” which would necessarily mimic the cosmology of its time.⁶ But ours is a world that is not a *kosmos*, a world uprooted from the metaphysical principle, and in this sense (but only in this sense) what we are left with is the remains, that is to say, garbage, because there is no principle according to which we could disintricate the filth from the substance, or according to which this intrication could be glossed over.⁷ Yet we do not want to understand this: art for us *is* the thing of the past, but in a sense radically different from Hegel's: art for us is no longer art – the naked fact is that art can no longer be understood or “consumed” according to the old patterns of creation and reception. The other side of this fact, however, is that, being altogether too accustomed to the idea of art as intelligibility made sensible, we lack any other concepts of art (other than art as entertainment). Hence the task of the present work. Finding in the works of Paul Celan, Samuel Beckett and Bruce Nauman what seem to be strategies for the destruction of traditional aesthetic values, we try to outline their programs for an aesthetics which would be of a world where views do not add up to one and all-encompassing Image⁸ (which is always the figure of reason, that is to say, the emanation of the Idea⁹) and, consequently, where views do not signify in the proper sense of the word, or where they signify nothing but themselves.

Yet the will to signification is strong, almost irresistible – even honest attempts to break away from it end up repeating its gestures in however dissimulated a form. But some important, though tentative, forays beyond the pale have already taken place, although this is precisely the one thing we can say about them: that “they have taken place” – we hesitate to call them successful. The reason they are not successful is easy to grasp if one understands that we cannot speak about them in terms of achievement –

⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 89. My introductory remarks are indebted to the discussion of the end of art in this book.

⁶ Nancy, *Muses*, p. 84.

⁷ Nancy, *Muses*, p. 85.

⁸ That is precisely why we speak about aesthetics – with the emphatic plural.

⁹ See the discussion in the chapter on Beckett.

10 this is not what these authors are after. Although their work ought not to be discussed in terms of meaning or signification, it can still be said that they are not interested in overcoming meaning (all scenarios of overcoming are inseparably involved with the values they want to overcome), but in what we might call *the other side of meaning*, its elusive ground and resources.

The appropriate analyses will follow, but a problem that remains to be considered is precisely their very appropriateness. One can ask: when art has crossed the ramparts of the polity of meaning, what can be the task of criticism? Is there any? After all, interpretation is also the product of the “cosmic” society and, from times immemorial, has always dealt in “objective” meanings. So if we cannot, in discussing Celan, Beckett and Nauman, provide meaning in its proper sense, interpretation may seem to be (strictly speaking) impossible. This, however, does not necessarily mean that criticism has nothing to say *about* meaninglessness. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno, clearly referring to Beckett, writes: “The non-objective status of interpretation does not deliver us from it, as though there was nothing to interpret.”¹⁰ And in the famous essay on *Endgame* he adds: “Understanding it can only mean understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning.”¹¹ But is this not a return to idealist principles? Adorno, trying to interpret the mimetic refusal of the play, seems to be speaking once again about assigning meaning to meaninglessness. This, however, is not exactly true – and the crux of the matter lies in the word “concretely.”¹²

The world of *Endgame* is a world that has been shattered into shards – the frame of reference was destroyed and what both the characters in the play and the interpreter are left with are the concrete particulars of an alarm-clock, toy-dog, ladder, pap, etc. After the stories have come to their end we are left with the concrete materiality of their discourse, with the remainder that remains after thematisation has been exhausted.¹³ This, however, does not allow us the metaphysical comfort of meaninglessness because Beckett’s meaninglessness is not absolute (meaninglessness treated as the universal state of things does not essentially differ from the Idea) but is presented to us as a product of the material (that is, incarnated) history of thought: what Beckett does is to demonstrate how meaning defeats itself on the way to signification. Thus Adorno again:

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 40.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. S. Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 243.

¹² My short discussion of the Beckett-Adorno connection is indebted to Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997).

¹³ Jacques Derrida, “This strange institution called literature: an interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 61.

Beckett's plays are absurd not because of the absence of meaning – then they would be irrelevant – but because they debate meaning. They broach its history. His work is governed by the obsession with a positive nothingness, but also by an evolved and thereby equally deserved meaninglessness, and that's why this should not be allowed to be reclaimed as a positive meaning.¹⁴

But how can an analysis of such a concrete analysis be performed by the interpreter? Is there a way which would allow us to remain within the realm of theory (the ideal) without leaving behind the material (the contingent)? In the final analysis, there seems to be at least one point of convergence here: the works by Beckett, Celan and Nauman are not only meaningless, they are meaninglessness *organised*.¹⁵ This is precisely the task left to the critic today: the very tracing of the ways in which meaning is dismantled. But that is not all. Although there exists a kind of art that is just babble, that is to say, art (but is it art?) that dismantles meaning in a purely aleatory manner (Adorno calls it irrelevant); a *formal* dismantling can never stop at the sheer negativity of its process. Whenever such an accomplishment takes place, some new formal structures are created whose very organising principle is the deconstruction of old referential frameworks of meaning but which, at the same time, by being accomplished in an organised manner, convert the effort into something that, although it cannot be called utterly positive, at least is not exclusively vapid and disposable. If we want to call the product of such a process meaning, it is not the meaning we used to know; it is something that comes from a territory that is largely foreign to us (mainly because it is not the region of knowledge) and whose topography it is the task of the interpreter to lay out. It is just such a (tentative) topography for the works of Celan, Beckett and Nauman that is undertaken in this work. The task, however, is of a kind in which one can only hint at what one is pursuing. As Adorno writes in an unpublished fragment, entitled “On Metaphysics”:

If the absolute cannot exist without the conditioned, then the conditioned has to be part of the absolute while still remaining conditioned. This agrees perfectly with the feeling (*Lebensgefühl*) that everything in this life is at the same time absolutely insignificant and infinitely meaningful.¹⁶

This impossible goal of infinite criticism is what is trying to put itself into practise in what follows. We do not have to add that it does so unsuccessfully.

¹⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 220–221.

¹⁵ Adorno, *Notes*, p. 242.

¹⁶ Quoted in Alexander García Düttmann, “Integral Actuality,” which is the preface to Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), p. 25.

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Sławomir Mastoń

**Wyrazić oczywistość:
Celan – Beckett – Nauman**

Streszczenie

Głównym celem pracy jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, czym mogą być literatura i sztuka *dzisiaj*, a co się z tym wiąże – również krytyczne odniesienie do starego jak nowoczesność problemu końca sztuki wysokiej. Wychodząc z założenia, że mówienie o końcu sztuki jest uzasadnione, tylko jeśli rozumiemy ją jako prezentację tego, co idealne, w formie uchwytniej dla zmysłów, w pracy próbowano spojrzeć na rolę twórczości i krytyki w naszym świecie, który nie jest już światem Idei w sensie heglowskim. Jako że dyskusja *stricte* teoretyczna w takim przypadku nie zawsze prowadzi do uchwytnych wniosków, autor zaproponował rozważenie wyżej wspomnianych problemów, posiłkując się przykładami dzieł Paula Celana, Samuela Becketta i Bruce'a Naumana, których praktyka pozwala, jego zdaniem, na sformułowanie pewnych szerszych wniosków dotyczących sensu tworzenia w epoce zwanej często post-postmodernistyczną.

Książkę, której wcześniejsze rozdziały poświęcone były rozważaniom na dość abstrakcyjnym poziomie, kończy polityczny apendyks, sytuujący wcześniej omawiane problemy sztuki „elitarnej” i „trudnej” w kontekście postulatów polityki tożsamościowej, a w szczególności dyskusji o sensowności kanonu czy też jego represyjności.

Sławomir Masłoń

Die Offensichtigkeit ausdrücken: Celan – Beckett – Nauman

Zusammenfassung

Das Hauptziel der vorliegenden Arbeit ist, die Frage zu beantworten, was Literatur und Kunst heutzutage bedeuten können. Der Verfasser möchte auch dem wie die Modernität alten und das Ende der Hochkunst betreffenden Problem kritisch gegenüberstehen. Von der Annahme ausgehend, dass die Erwartung des Hochkünstlerischen nur dann berechtigt ist, wenn die Hochkunst als eine Darstellung von einem Idealen und für unsere Sinne Wahrnehmbaren betrachtet wird, versucht er, der Rolle des künstlerischen Schaffens und der Kritik in unserer Welt, die schon keine hegelianische Ideenwelt ist, auf den Grund zu gehen. Die eine rein theoretische Diskussion in dem Fall nicht immer zu greifbaren Schlüssen führt, entscheidet sich der Verfasser, oben genannte Probleme am Beispiel der Werke von Paul Celan, Samuel Beckett und Bruce Nauman zu ergründen. Er ist zwar der Meinung, dass ihre Praxis erlaubt, allgemeinere Schlüsse über den Sinn des künstlerischen Schaffens in der oft postmodernistisch genannten Epoche zu ziehen.

Das Buch, dessen einzelne Kapitel den ziemlich abstrakten Betrachtungen gewidmet wurden, endet mit einem politischen Appendix, in dem der Verfasser die früher angesprochenen Probleme der „elitären“ und „schwierigen“ Kunst im Kontext der Forderungen der Identitätspolitik, und besonders der Diskussion über den Sinn oder die Repression des Kanons bespricht.

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