
***Echo's Bones* and Samuel Beckett's Early Aesthetics: "The Vulture", "Alba" and "Dortmunder" as Poetic Manifestos**

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Abstract. The present article is devoted to the exposition of Samuel Beckett's aesthetics as formulated and exemplified in the key poems from *Echo's Bones*: "The Vulture", "Alba", and "Dortmunder". These texts emerge as poetic manifestos, in which Beckett explores the sources and materials of poetry, and addresses broader philosophical questions about poetry and art in general. Among his chief aesthetic concerns are the office of poetry vis-à-vis the human condition, as well as the efficacy of verbal magic, intimately connected with the possibility of artistic transcendence, or in other words, with the redemptive power of verbal art. These poems provide ample evidence that Beckett was already grappling with the notion of the (f)utility of art in a world filled with inevitable suffering and trying to formulate a poetic response to the pain and struggle of existence, while entertaining the possibility of redemption or transcendence through artistic creation and aesthetic contemplation. Especially "Alba" and "Dortmunder" seem to suggest that poetry or art momentarily eclipses the phenomenal world and offers a surrogate salvation, and an aesthetic experience emerges as a palliative to the anguish and turmoil of existence, two notions to which Beckett had remained faithful throughout his long literary career.

Key Words. Aesthetics, Poetics, Artistic Transcendence, Sound Texture, Musicality, Self-reflexive Concerns.

Resumen. El presente artículo tiene como objetivo la delineación de la estética de Samuel Beckett en su formulación y ejemplificación en tres poemas centrales de *Echo's Bones*: "The Vulture", "Alba" y "Dortmunder". Estos textos se constituyen como manifiestos poéticos en los que Beckett indaga en las fuentes y los materiales de la poesía y trata cuestiones filosóficas profundas sobre la poesía y el arte en general. Sus principales preocupaciones poéticas incluyen la función de la poesía frente a la condición humana, además de la eficacia de la magia verbal y su íntima relación con la posibilidad una transcendencia estética o, en otras palabras, con el poder redentor del arte verbal. Estos poemas ofrecen una prueba irrefutable de que Beckett ya se hallaba enfrascado en la noción de la (f)utilidad artística en un mundo repleto de inevitable

sufrimiento, si bien concibe la posibilidad de redención o trascendencia por medio de la creación artística y la contemplación estética. “Alba” y “Dortmunder” en especial parecen sugerir que la poesía o el arte eclipsan momentáneamente el mundo de lo sensible y ofrecen una salvación sustitutiva acompañada de la experiencia estética como paliativo a la angustia y la agitación de la existencia. Beckett se mantuvo fiel a estas dos nociones durante su larga carrera literaria.

Palabras clave. Estética, poética, trascendencia artística, textura del sonido, musicalidad, preocupaciones autorreflexivas.

The present article is devoted to the exposition of Beckett’s aesthetics as formulated and exemplified in the key poems from *Echo’s Bones*: “The Vulture”, “Alba” and “Dortmunder”. These texts emerge as Beckett’s poetic manifestos, in which he explores the sources and materials of poetry, and addresses broader philosophical questions about poetry or art in general. Among his chief aesthetic concerns there are the place and obligation of poetry in the world as well as the efficacy of verbal magic, intimately connected with the possibility of artistic transcendence, or in other words, with the redemptive power of verbal, but not only, art. Leo Borsani in his study *The Culture of Redemption* looks into the cultural and philosophical assumptions that “make it natural to think of art as having such a [redemptive] power” (7), and begins his inquiry by turning to Proust, the author who was the subject of Beckett’s first monograph and with whose ideas on literature and on the human condition the young Irish writer was very well conversant. For Borsani, Proust “embodies perhaps more clearly – in a sense, even more crudely – than any other major artist a tendency to think of cultural symbolizations as essentially reparative”, and enshrines “the notion of art as salvaging somehow damaged experience” (7).

Before embarking on the task proper, that is the exposition of Beckett’s aesthetics as advanced in “The Vulture”, “Alba”, and “Dortmunder”, it might do well to emphasize that poetry had always ranked high on Beckett’s artistic agenda. As an aspiring young writer in France in 1930s, he set great store by his poems and was disappointed by the lack of response and recognition he had desired for his poetic works (Beckett 260). While in the middle period of his literary career he chose to channel his creativity into plays and novels, he returned to the poetic mode in his late fiction, in which he deliberately blurred the boundary between prose and poetry. In general, Beckett’s late prose displays many features of a poetic text and reveals techniques characteristic of the lyrical mode, visible especially in the strict rhythmical organization of textual passages and the dense patterning of verbal material. His late offerings are drawn even more deeply into the realm of poetry by their chief operative principles: repetition, polysemy, and ellipsis.

As opposed to the starkness and austerity of his late texts, Beckett’s early poetry is marked by verbal exuberance. It can be cryptic, at times almost undecipherable, and the interpretive effort is not always adequately rewarded; sometimes it is thwarted by obscure personal references, indefatigably elicited from Beckett himself by Lawrence Harvey during long personal interviews with the author (Harvey xii). Hugh Kenner argues that the autobiographical and anecdotal elements in Beckett’s early poems frustrate an attentive reader. As he puts it, “the poems are apt to leave a reader blank though for Beckett they fix circumstantial memories,” adding that “[n]one of his other writing is entangled with his biography in so specific a way” (43). However, this can be overstated, and the presence of the personal element should not discourage literary analysts from serious investigation of Beckett’s pre-war poetry.

Excluding *The Whoroscope* published in 1930 and a handful of miscellaneous poems, the early fruits of Beckett's poetic labor were brought together in the collection *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates (EBOP)*, which came out in 1935. Opening the volume, "The Vulture", which was the last of the *EBOP* poems to be written (Beckett 261), may be regarded as a brief manifesto: a condensed exposition of Beckett's poetics. The poem is typographically divided into three pairs of lines:

dragging his hunger through the sky
of my skull shell of sky and earth

stooping to the prone who must
soon take up their life and walk

mocked by a tissue that may not serve
till hunger earth and sky be offal.¹

As Harvey observes, the starting point for "The Vulture" is the opening stanza of Goethe's "Winter Journey to the Harz Mountains", in which the poet's song is figured as a vulture seeking for his prey (112). Commenting on Beckett's appropriation of the motif, Lawlor and Pilling note that "Goethe's invocation of the spirit of inspiration as a hawk [sic] hovering on its prey is transformed by SB into what P. J. Murphy has termed the 'Vulture aesthetic'" (Beckett 261). Murphy defines this aesthetic "as a combination of elements", "an appropriation and revision of aspects of Dante's vision concerning the Terrestrial Paradise motif as the privileged zone of creative consciousness whereby the artist-figure can reconcile apparently contradictory elements" (177). Beckett, as "artist-vulture", seeks to "integrate various aspects of the real and ideal" (Murphy 199). The poetic spirit imaged as a vulture feeding on carrion also resembles Shem the Penman, from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, the inveterate prophet of impending doom and calamities, described as "Sniffer of carrion, premature gravedigger, seeker of the nest of evil in the bosom of a good word" (189).

In Beckett's poem, in the opening line of the first distich, the vulture is "dragging his hunger" like a net to catch fish – it is searching for prey. The bird appears detached from the speaker's subjectivity, it has a separate existence, which is suggested by the reference to "hunger" as "his." The designation of place, "across the sky", defines the external reality as the vulture's domain. Thus distinction between the bird gliding high in the air and the poet's inner world is thus firmly established. And the opening distich is built on the opposition between the subjective and the objective.

But the next line gives an unexpected semantic twist to "the sky", aligning it syntactically with "my skull shell of sky and earth", effecting a shift from the outward to the inward. In effect, then, in the second line the external world of the sky is appropriated and internalized by the speaker's mind. It becomes "the sky of my skull shell of sky and earth". The poet's "skull" is a "shell," a container of his inner landscape. This attempted fusion of the disparate materials, the coupling of the objective and the subjective, in the opening lines of "The Vulture" anticipates the thrust of the whole volume. As Harvey explains, the poems included in this collection display the tension that characterizes Beckett's mature work – the tension between the external reality or what he calls the macrocosm, and the poet's inner world, the microcosm (75-76). This polarity could be restated in philosophical terms as the split between the "I" and the "non-I," between the individual consciousness and the all-encompassing Being. However, this is by no means the only concern of the poem in question. Before proceeding further in the exploration of its semantics, it might do well to demonstrate how this integration of the objective and the subjective, of the self and the non-self, is reflected

in the poem's sound texture. Built on distinct phonic repetitions, a meaningful, sonically aligned sequence is established: "the sky in my skull shell," bringing together the external world, "the sky," /skaɪ/, the speaker, "my," /maɪ/, and his containing "skull shell," /skʌl ʃel/. Significantly, the poet's brain, "my skull", containing the particle /aɪ sk/, by way of sound mirroring includes the inverted "sky", /skaɪ/.

In the following distich, the poem broadens into a new thematics. The opening phrase, "Stooping to the prone", denotes an ambivalent action. On the surface, it expresses charity, kindness, attending to "the prone," that is the helpless or the stricken. But it simultaneously gives rise to the starkly opposite meaning, that of descending upon helpless prey spread on the ground so as to feast on it, which derives from another meaning attached to the verb "to stoop" in falconry: "to come down as a hawk does on its prey" (*Webster's 1913 Dictionary*).

Owing to a run-on line, a verse boundary separates "must" from the qualified verb: "must / soon." The suggestion of imminent death, with "die" as the most likely complement of "the prone who must," is raised but then defused in the following line: "soon take up their life and walk." Commenting on these lines, Harvey points out that they reverse the meaning of the Biblical injunction "Take up thy bed and walk", because rather than "a gift given by Christ, life is a burden" (117-118).

The professed imminent restoration to life carries eschatological suggestions: it evokes the biblical image of the resurrected dead, who shall rise and walk again. However, these possible eschatological concerns contrast with the final alignment of "hunger earth and sky" in the closing line of the poem, where the concrete, the essential facts of existence are set against the irrational insistence on the certitude of salvation, against abstract speculations of theology. So it seems more likely that the action of stooping to the prone may be read as a case of false appearances – the vulture seeking food to satisfy his hunger is deceived by the seeming lifelessness of a potential quarry.

The final distich, "mocked by a tissue that may not serve / till hunger earth and sky be offal", reflects the first one by means of striking verbal repetition. Thus, "his hunger" reappears in the final line stripped of the possessive pronoun, while the phrase "sky and earth" recurs in the reversed order as "earth and sky." Nevertheless, despite this verbal recurrence, in the conclusion of the poem Beckett's "vulture poetics" is formulated in a new and decisive way. Most importantly, "hunger" that was initially presented as the vulture's hunger, as objective and distinct from the poet's subjectivity and his creative mind, separate from the speaker's "skull shell of earth and sky", is now integrated in the sequence composed by "earth" and "sky." This move carries momentous implications. Alongside "earth and sky", that is alongside the external factors, hunger itself, the poetic process, becomes the offal, food for thought, or more specifically, a material for poetry. This lends itself to the following reading: only if the process of inspiration and creation itself are part of the poetic undertaking, only if these become a subject of poetry in their own right, "a tissue" that now "mocks" the poet, that defies his attempts, will prove nourishing – will it "serve" his artistic purpose. Referring to Baudelaire as an exemplar of modern poets in terms that are striking relevant for the present examination, Borsani speaks of "[t]he insatiable appetite of the [poet's] self for the nonself", which destroys an equilibrium not so much between the self and the world, but rather, "in Freudian terms, the balance between ego structures and the innumerable (dormant, suppressed, or repressed) representations that are generally not allowed to break through the ego's boundaries" (74). These external stimuli, in Borsani's account, reactivate memory, memory, which is "filled with images of the nonself," and in this way poets "rediscover the nonself within the self", and "the self is penetrated by the alien nature of its own contents" (74). And it might be added, this invasion of the self by the memories, traces of the nonself contained in the mind, spurs a creative process.

The above considerations prompt the conclusion that "The Vulture" does indeed raise complex aesthetic issues. It can be seen as an early statement of Beckett's poetics, in which the young poet seeks to establish the tasks of his poetry, its place and significance in the world. It does seem that his poetry refers to itself, that it speaks about its own genesis, about its coming into being. However, it goes beyond such self-reflexive concerns with the artistic process. The poetry is justified by its double engagement with the objective reality and the poet's subjective life. In order to accomplish this, in order to negotiate the self-nonsel or inward-outward polarity, the poet must distance himself from his inner being, he must objectify the contents of his mind, treating it, just as he does the external world, as a subject of scrutiny and poetic elaboration.

The aesthetic concerns figure largely also in "Alba" and "Dortmunder", the poems often paired together by the critics due to their structural and thematic affinity. "An alba" is a Provençal aubade or dawn song (Beckett 270), but, as Seán Lawlor argues, Beckett converts a dawn song into "an extraordinary hymn of sexual expectation" (229). Discussing the implications of this particular generic convention, Harvey states that "[i]n the alba the poet sings of the sorrow and anguish of the lovers at the approach of dawn, which means their separation" (83).

In the opening stanza of the poem lines 1 and 5 are nearly identical, enclosing lines 2, 3 and 4:

before morning you shall be here
and Dante and the Logos and all strata and mysteries
and the branded moon
beyond the white plane of music
that you shall establish here before morning

As a result, tension arises between duality and trinity as competing constructive principles, but the triad wins over, with the second stanza and the third stanza containing, respectively, three lines and nine lines, and confirming the rule of the triad. Furthermore, the opening line of the middle stanza begins with three consecutive stressed syllables, in "grave suave singing silk". The trinity is further supported by the number of syllables in the final three lines: 3, 6, 3. This should not be surprising in the poem citing Dante, for the triune principle, with the *terza rima* and the division of the *Divine Comedy* into three parts, is the hallmark of the Italian poet.

According to Lawlor, the object of the speaker's address, the eponymous Alba, is Dante's Beatrice; as he puts it, "the second line associates the addressee with Beatrice as she and Dante pass into the sphere of the moon (*Paradiso* II), and the vision of the Logos, as the mystery of human and divine nature united in a single essence, is anticipated" (229). But Harvey draws attention to the fact that the girl called Alba also appears in Beckett's early novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, and the protagonist of the novel, "refuses to trade the experience of her mysterious beauty, which is akin to the experience of the microcosm that art makes possible, for an abstract counter in a mystical or theological system"; in brief, she "will not be his Beatrice" (Harvey 261-262). Harvey's point is valid in as much as he interprets Beckett's poem as a conversation with Dante's idealism and dogmatism, whereas Lawlor's argument finds little support in the text itself. Rather than treating "Alba" as a poem in its own right, Lawlor basically reduces it to a mere footnote to Dante's *Paradiso*.

In the poem, the manifestation of Alba is accompanied by "the white plane of music". She is the cause, the origin of the phenomenon, as her presence, "you shall be here". modulates into the evocative power: "that you shall establish here". The experience that Alba is expected to evoke is linguistically insulated by the phrase "before morning", which opens and closes the stanza. Her sphere of existence seems limited to night, the time "before morning". Yet the

modal verb “shall” qualifying the presence of the addressee, in “you shall be here”, may suggest that Alba’s presence is only postulated or called for, so in actuality she is not there. She will be summoned by the strength of the speaker’s invocation – she will appear only in a poetic vision.

Even though the first stanza of the poem abounds with conjunctions, the syntactic and semantic relations between the linked phrases are far from clear. At least at first glance, “and” as a connective opening the second line implicates the addressee, “you,” in the sequence composed by “Dante and the Logos and all strata and mysteries and the branded moon”. But the continuity is disrupted by the appearance of “beyond” suggesting transcendence or exclusion, for perhaps the white plane of music will cause Dante and the theological intricacies of *Paradiso* to recede. In effect, then, “Dante and the Logos and all strata and mysteries and the branded moon” shall be relegated to the realm “beyond the white plane of music”.

In addition to the verbal repetition, the opening and closing lines of the first stanza display a remarkable convergence of sound, with the conspicuous core configuration /ʃ. l .b/ in “shall be” and “shall establish”, the latter additionally featuring the impressive phonic chiasmus: /ʃ. l l. ʃ/. The duplication of the vocalic nucleus in the twice-repeated temporal expression “before morning” offers a remarkable instance of sonic recurrence supporting the lexical return in / ɔ:r ɔ:r/, in keeping with the Irish standard pronunciation. In the second line, invoking cosmic harmony and the transcendent order, “all strata”, /l.str/, phonemically blends “Logos”, /l.s/ and “mysteries” /st.r/. Resonances between the lines occur, too, enriching the sound texture of the stanza. Thus, “branded moon”, /br.n m.n/, echoes “before morning”, /b.r m.n/, while “branded”, /b.nd/, points forward to “beyond”, /b.nd/.

In the second stanza, “grave suave singing silk / stoop to the black firmament of areca / rain on the bamboo flower of smoke alley of willows”, comes across as an intermission, featuring glimpses of an exotic landscape and seemingly unrelated to the preceding and the following stanza. Yet, for all the appearances, it is crucially linked with the preceding unit. These cryptic lines must necessarily baffle even a dedicated reader. As Lawlor explains, “the discovery of Beckett’s source for these three gnomic lines, Louis Laloy’s *La Musique Chinoise* (Lawlor 10), helps us to understand the passage as a synaesthetic account of an interlude played on a Chinese lute or K’in (qin)” (229-230).

These lines do more than describe in metaphorical terms the art of the lutist and the delicate sounds elicited from the instrument: in fact, they seek to embody the music in their verbal texture. The predominance of “musical” sonorants, fricatives, and nasals is striking. Within this brief textual span /l/ and /r/ appear five times each, complemented by the hissing /s/ and its voiced variant, and the prominent /m/ and /n/. Notwithstanding this, the phonetic orchestration of the line “grave suave singing silk”, /gr s s s.lk/, recalls “Logos and all strata and mysteries,” /l.g.s l.s.r s.r/. This sonic convergence may readily suggest that indeed the evocative power of art, “the white plane of music” established “here and now” by the lutist, supplants the theological speculation on the abstract “beyond”, dismissing the spiritual ideal realm extolled by Dante in *Paradiso*.

A dense patterning of sound characterizes also the remaining lines of the stanza. The consonantal composition of “black firmament”, /bl f.rm/, recurs in a slightly altered order in “bamboo flower”, /b.m fl.r/, underscoring the musicality of the stanza, which is enhanced by the unique accumulation of the liquids /l/ and /w/ in “flower alley of willows”. The observed rich verbal texture lends support to Harvey’s statement that “Alba” is a poem “dedicated to the hypnotic sorcery of art and music” and its effect depends on “the incantation of flowing sound and rhythm” (167).

The imperative “stoop” in the second line: “stoop to the black firmament of areca”, deviates sonically from the rest of the unit, heralding the following stanza, where it resurfaces in the company of its phonetic kin “dust”: “though you stoop [...] to endorse the dust”. The action, “stoop”, /s.t/, and the aim, “endorse”, /d.s/, merge in the beneficiary of the action, “dust”,

/d.st/, that is humanity, mortal flesh. The “you”, that is Alba, in an act of Christ-like compassion and grace, attends to the gross, to the material, but this shall not add to her “bounty”. It does not reflect on her essential nature because her concerns lie elsewhere, not in the moral or ethical sphere. She is not a savior, she does not redeem mortality. The two properties of the addressee, “beauty”, /b.ti/, and “bounty”, /b.ti/, through a close sonic correspondence are drawn together in meaning. The idea of plenitude is thus correlated with the realm of aesthetics.

The beauty of Alba is a “[white] sheet” before the speaker, an empty page, reminiscent of “the white plane of music”, and her not merely nominal whiteness gathers several distinct layers of meaning. Much like Moby-Dick’s whiteness, it may denote Alba’s ontological inscrutability, while her blankness suggests readiness to be inscribed with features, with significance. As an empty page facing the speaker-poet, she precipitates an act of creation. She is the Muse, the impulse that incites the speaker to create. It is her beauty that moves him. Her beauty is “a statement of itself”, hence it is self-contained, self-referential, as is music. This beauty is reflected in the sound texture of the line, in its superimposed phonological order: “beauty shall be a sheet”, /b.tʃ bʃ.t/.

It is also drawn across “the tempest of emblems”, so for the speaker it supplants the macrocosm or phenomenal reality, and the latter is reduced to the mere play of signs, drained of substance even if vivid and dramatic. The phrase “tempest of emblems” features the sequence of four similar vowels, /e/ and /ə/, while /emb/ in “emblems” is almost a perfect echo of /emp/ in “tempest”. As a result, sonic cohesion annuls the implicit semantic contradiction between “tempest”, a natural phenomenon, and “emblems”, belonging to the semiotic order.

The poem aims at equating Alba and “the white plane of music” with poetry itself, figured here as a blank page, to be inscribed with words and converted into verbal magic. The aesthetic trance generated by Alba’s beauty suspends or cancels the flow of time, indefinitely prolonging the night and keeping dawn at bay “so that there is no sun and no unveiling and no host”. Thus, no sunrise shall dispel the comforting and obliterating darkness. And there will be no stunning revelation, no unwelcome exposure of truth to disturb the preferred condition of timeless contemplation. On the other hand, the final absence, “no host”, points to the denial of spiritual replenishment and to the impossibility of redemption. “Host” refers to Christ’s body (a communion wafer as a miniature version of both “the white plane” and a blank page!), but it also echoes “the dust” from the second line of the stanza, mortality inherent in the human condition. The projected juxtaposition of “host” and “dust” brings out contrast between the promised salvation by partaking of the body of Christ in a communion (prefiguring the ultimate inclusion on Christ’s body in the afterlife) and hopeless mortality, doomed to perish.

The triple absence, “no sun and no unveiling and no host”, is mirrored in the final triple presence: “I,” “the sheet” and “bulk dead”. The negative trinity gives way to the affirmative sequence, in which “I and then the sheet” bespeaks an act of poetic creation. Alas, art has no redemptive power, it does not enable transcendence of the human condition, because “bulk dead”, the unredeemed mortality, stubbornly persists. This underscores the disparity between the ideal harmony of a poetic vision and “the way of all flesh”, the world of temporality and corporeality. Art offers a surrogate salvation, an aesthetic experience provides deliverance from time and from the pain of consciousness as long as it lasts, which means only briefly. Erik Tønning in his essay “‘I am not reading philosophy’: Beckett and Schopenhauer” points out Beckett’s “acute sensitivity to suffering, and in particular his outrage at any attempt to justify suffering as potentially redemptive in terms of a larger cosmic scheme” (27). He identifies this “ethical impulse” as the one to which “Beckett adheres to uncompromisingly over the whole course of his writing career” (27), underlying his vehement resistance to the Christian “‘answer’ of eschatological hope” and his rejection of the Romantic “solution” to the existential problem via the supposed redemptive power of art (31). Accordingly, in the examined poem the conjured

artistic beauty and the strength of the poet's vision enable only a temporary lift out of the darkness and morass of the human condition.

The office of poetry, or in a more general sense art, vis-à-vis "the way of all flesh" is further developed in "Dortmunder". For a number of reasons, this poem is often paired with "Alba". According to Harvey, in both poems the themes of "[t]he experience of physical love, the microcosm of the mind, and art, especially music, are of central importance" (261). In addition to the obvious reading of the title as a reference to the German town, "Dortmunder" can also be construed as the compound of the German "Dort," meaning "there, not here", and "mund", "world." In effect, it may signify either "the other world" or something not of this world, not belonging to this world, and the whole coinage would point to an enigmatic "dweller not of this world". But it must be noted that the raised suggestion runs counter to the ensuing poetic argument.

The poem consists of 14 lines, displaying a sonnet-line construction and harking back to the Petrarchan or Elizabethan sonnet and to the conventions of courtly love; the latter, however, in "Dortmunder" are heavily subverted. The first part of the poem comprises the opening five lines:

In the magic the Homer dusk
past the red spire of sanctuary
I null she royal hulk
hasten to the violet lamp to the thin K' in music of the bawd.

Even a cursory glance at the initial section of the poem reveals obvious parallels between "Alba" and "Dortmunder". In the latter, "the white plane of music" reappears transformed into "the thin K' in music", the sharp tones of the Chinese lute, but the performer this time is "the bawd", which signals the transposition of an aesthetic experience into a less ethereal setting than that of "Alba", it is now more earthy and licentious. The timeframe of "Alba", "before morning", is reflected in "the Homer dusk", "the sheet" finds its counterpart in "a scroll" in the second part of "Dortmunder", while "emblems" from "Alba" are matched by the "signaculum", also a semiotic term. The forceful enunciation at the end of "Dortmunder": "Schopenhauer is dead", mirrors "bulk dead" closing "Alba," while "bulk" is unmistakably echoed in "null" and "hulk" in the third line of "Dortmunder".

Notwithstanding these numerous affinities, the two poems display significant differences. In "Alba" the subject is foregrounded: "I and then the sheet", while the speaker in the third line of "Dortmunder" effaces himself by declaring: "I null". He becomes a non-presence, divested of significance, when projected against his female companion rendered as the massive and imposing "royal hulk", while the common sonic core /ʌl/ of "null" and "hulk" underscores the semantic opposition. But what primarily distinguishes "Dortmunder" is the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane – the spiritual is conflated here with the sensual and the earthy. The conflation is already signaled by "the red spire of the sanctuary", where the color signifying sexual passion becomes an attribute of the temple, and the sanctuary merges into a brothel. The mysterious "magic" of the time through /dʒ.k/ is reflected in "sanctuary", in its voiceless counterpart /ktʃ/, while "Homer dusk", /r d.s/, is matched by "red spire," /r.ds/, enhancing the integrity of the setting delineated in the opening two lines. It is worth noting that the succession of colors in "Dortmunder", from red through violet to black, in "the black eyes" in the second part of the poem, is meaningful, denoting the gradual falling into darkness, the intensification of nighttime.

Sexual overtones are already carried by the allusions embedded in the opening line that sets the scene: "In the magic the Homer dusk". Lawlor states that "While magic is a characteristic of commerce between gods (or goddesses) and men in Homer, in Circe's case it

is especially potent” (233). He goes on to explain that the association of “the Homer hour more specifically with Circe not only elaborates the magical element [...] but also pays oblique homage to *Ulysses*” (Lawlor 234). In support of the latter, he adduces Richard Ellmann Joyce’s notes for the Nighttown or Circe episode in the novel, which include: “scene: the brothel; Hour; Art: magic; Colour: violet; Symbol: whore; Technic: hallucination” (Lawlor 234). But “the violet lamp” to which the speaker and his female companion hasten in “Dortmunder” is at the same time an allusion to “the violet hour” in Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*, the time “when the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting” (Eliot 132), when sexual desire, subdued during the day, seeks its satisfaction. The second invocation of the violet hour in *The Waste Land* ushers in the seduction scene observed by Tiresias. Thus, “the violet lamp” foreshadows the encounter set in the brothel depicted in the next stanza:

She stands before me in the bright stall
sustaining the jade splinters
the scarred signaculum of purity quiet
the eyes the yes black till the plagal east
shall resolve the long night phrase.

The performance takes place in a brothel, but the object of the speaker’s attention is placed in “the bright stall”, which can be read in two contrastive ways. As “a seat in the choir of a church, for one of the officiating clergy” (*Webster’s 1913 Dictionary*), it denotes the religious sphere, but “a stall” refers also to a market, to a commercial transaction, thus, it hints at prostitution. The tension between the sacred and the lecherous is suggested also by the sonic convergence between “bright stall”, /br.t st.l/, and “signaculum of purity”, /s.l p.r.t/. The latter, according to Lawlor and Pilling, alluding to “signaculum virginis, hymen”, “the hymen as token of virginity”, acquires the opposite meaning – degradation (Beckett, 274). In Beckett’s poem, the woman’s “signaculum of purity” is “scarred”, bearing visible marks of repeated sexual encounters, pointing to her promiscuity. The vision of the woman’s sexuality, her erotic allure and defilement is foregrounded, which belies the alleged token of “purity”. The black eyes of the woman betray the negation of innocence.

The prominence of /s/, /ʃ/, /z/, /l/, and /r/ in the second part: “She stands”, “stall”, “sustaining”, “splinters”, “scarred signaculum”, “east”, “shall”, “eyes”, “resolve”, “phrase”, “before”, “bright”, “purity”, “black”, “plagal”, and “long”, assaults the ear. The saturation of the lines with the sibilants and the sonorants clearly has an onomatopoeic function, imitating the played music, “the jade splinters”, a synesthetic rendering of the sounds produced by the lute, linking them with the color green.

In the standard reading of the poem, “she”, the woman commanding the speaker’s attention, is equated with the bawd. As Ruby Cohn puts it, “The beloved is a lute-playing bawd in a brothel” (33). Lawlor, too, in his article conflates the two figures, the courtesan referred to as “royal hulk” and the bawd (235). Yet is “she” that “stands in the bright stall” and “the bawd” one and the same figure? It bears recalling that in the first part of the poem the speaker and the woman together “hasten to the violet lamp to the thin K’ in music of the bawd”, and the separate references to the two female figures, first to “royal hulk”, the speaker’s escort, and then to “the bawd” at the end of the sentence, rather challenge the accepted identification of one with the other.

The third part of the poem brings a resolution, analogical to the finale of a musical composition, a concerto or a sonata:

Then, as a scroll, folded
and the glory of her dissolution enlarged

in me, Habbakuk, mard of all sinners.
Schopenhauer is dead, the bawd
puts her lute away.

Much depends on the comma placed between “scroll” and “folded” in the line: “Then, as a scroll, folded”. The latter, freed syntactically, may refer to the woman, who having completed her performance, collapses, folds into herself, like an ancient scroll. The link is supported by the consonantal pattern /skr/ binding “scroll” with “scarred”, /sk.r/, the battered attribute of her sexuality, her “signaculum of purity”, also featuring /s/, /k/, and /r/. The impressive sequence of /oʊl/ in “scroll, folded”, the doubling of the accented syllables, reinforces the verbal association.

Habbakuk, a biblical prophet, the observer and recorder of the glorious dissolution of the woman, calls himself “mard”, while referring to the female artist playing the lute as “bawd”. The two designations coalesce sonically in “bard”, underscoring the ambiguous link between them. But while the brothel-keeper is elevated as an artist figure, the prophet is denigrated as “mard”, mired in scatology through the association with “merd”. Habbakuk, as Lawlor and Pilling explain, is “the Old Testament prophet incontinent in the face of God’s wrath” (Beckett 274).

Unlike the sheet facing the poet in “Alba”, a folded scroll cannot be written upon; hence, the woman in “Dortmunder” cannot incite the creative process. The woman’s “dissolution” is merely “enlarged”, replicated to a higher degree in the witnessing scribe. Habbakuk records the “glory” of the woman’s “dissolution”, sacrilegiously matching two rather incompatible terms, which amounts to the inversion of the familiar religious concept. In the poem it is not Jehovah’s glory that is enlarged in the Old Testament prophet. It is the prostitute lasciviously dancing in the brothel to the accompaniment of Chinese string music that earns the praise.

The end of the poem coincides with the end of the musical performance of the bawd. The closing statement: “Schopenhauer is dead, the bawd / puts her lute away”, consists of two brief, matter-of-fact simple declarative clauses, which are rather blunt in their effect and dispel the poetic enchantment. The invocation of the German philosopher is relevant, for he discoursed widely on the function of art as a release from time, and a relief from the pain of life, which he envisaged as a ceaseless struggle. Speaking of Beckett’s relation to the German philosopher, Tønning goes as far as to claim that “there simply *is* no comparable influence on Beckett’s work, philosophical or otherwise” (21). He further notes “Schopenhauer’s remarkable utility for Beckett”, arguing that “Schopenhauer’s place in Beckett’s intellectual development is unique because he becomes a kind of conduit through which any number of related influences and imaginative impulses can pass” (21). Patrick Stewart points out in *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work* that Schopenhauer’s influence is already discernible in Beckett’s study *Proust* published in 1930, in the young Irish writer’s adaptation of Schopenhauer’s redefinition of the original sin as “the guilt of existence itself” (5). In this early text Beckett sees the essence of “the true Proustian tragedy” in the necessary expiation of “the original and eternal sin of him and all his ‘socii malorum’, the sin of having been born” (quoted in Stewart 5). For Tønning, the calamity of having been born “becomes something like a Beckettian emblem or identification-tag thereafter” (26). Despite the numerous resonances between the two authors, the Norwegian scholar claims that Beckett’s pessimism is even more radical; he accepts “Schopenhauer’s description of the phenomenal world as a prison-house of being, a cycle of perpetual torture”, but he “intensifies the philosopher’s pessimism by insisting that there is *no* possible salvation or ‘way out’” (31).

As Władysław Tatarkiewicz notes, Schopenhauer did acknowledge several remedies for the anguish of existence. One is moral in its nature – it is compassion that enables us to forget about our own suffering; the other is aesthetic – it is contemplation of art objects (218). Stewart

states that the German philosopher's "palliative system indeed begins with aesthetic contemplation" (7). As he explains:

The aesthetic object elicits a disinterested contemplation in which the viewer's individual will is suspended, along with the separation of object and subject. The viewer and viewed in effect merge and 'we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception, but the two have become one, since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception' (7).

Thus, the courtesan's "dissolution" enlarged in Habbakuk may suggest not only the erasure of identity but also the abolition of the boundary between the viewer and the performer, the merger of the subject and the object effected in an aesthetic contemplation.

For Schopenhauer, in addition to dissolving the distinction between the self and the nonself, art can suspend the pressure of will, which is the source of all the sorrow in the world – in the contemplation of beauty, which is disinterested, all our drives and desires are put to rest (Tatarkiewicz 218). Schopenhauer's palliative function of art brings to mind the value of storytelling, deeply established in our culture, which Jeffrey Williams calls "a pharmakon to stave off danger and grief," stating that "[n]arrative is frequently coded as this kind of anesthesia to illness" (111).

In "Dortmunder", dawn disrupting the artistic performance is charged negatively, it is unwelcome. The arrival of daytime will dispel the aesthetic trance induced by the music, by "the long night phrase." Nighttime is conducive to music and contemplation. It brings respite from the tiresome struggle, from the trivial, mundane occupations that fill an arduous everyday existence. Not without a reason "east" with its connotations of sunrise is qualified as "plagal," something to be shunned like a plague. In musicology, "plagal" refers to a break in the harmonic cadence, but also, by its etymology, to a wound (Harvey 74). Thus, a sunrise is a plagal note that destroys the established harmony. In Beckett's poem, dawn erases the condition of a blissful and tranquil contemplation brought about by an aesthetic experience. Quite tellingly, the woman's sexuality, her "scarred signaculum of purity", is "quiet"; even though the performance takes place in a brothel, the erotic element is subdued in favor of an artistic sublimation. The will-to-live, which according to Schopenhauer, finds its utmost expression in sexual reproduction (Stewart 5), has been suspended for a spell. But a release from temporality and a respite from the pressure of the reprehensible will-to-live are only brief, and the advent of the plagal east merely postponed.

Together, "The Vulture", "Alba", and "Dortmunder" illustrate the major aesthetic preoccupations of Beckett's early poetry. They provide ample evidence that, already at this stage of his career, the Irish writer grappled with the notion of the (f)utility of art in the world filled with inevitable suffering as part of the human condition, trying to formulate a poetic response to the pain and struggle of existence, and entertaining the possibility of redemption or transcendence through artistic creation and aesthetic contemplation. The valorization of night and music as well as the soothing effect of an aesthetic experience are two major premises of "Alba" and "Dortmunder". In "Alba" the speaker is elevated by the sublime epiphany, in which the woman's "beauty" and "bounty" supplant the external reality. But in "Dortmunder" the perfection of the feminine ideal gives way to "the scarred signaculum of purity" of the sensual courtesan. The speaker as "the mard of all sinners" denigrates himself, nevertheless the performance has worked its charm, and will and desire, two chief springs of human misery, have been abated.

The title of the volume, pointing to the myth of Narcissus, reveals its underlying thematics: the narcissistic concern with the self, whereby poetic production is a reflection of a poet's unique personality, an index to his singular mind, which guarantees its originality.

However, owing to the other persona of the drama, the eponymous nymph Echo, the opposite comes into play: repetition, translated here into imitation, adherence to and continuation of the literary tradition. When discussing “Enueg I”, David Wheatley speaks of “an arrangement of the textual surface as a series of intertextual overlaps, ‘opening and closing’ onto a space somewhere between Beckett’s and the poem’s various sponsor-influences” (151). In a similar vein, commenting on Beckett’s early poems, John Pilling notes that “Beckett’s expressed poetics of statement could, at this very early stage, as legitimately have formulated itself in terms of re-animating pre-existent motifs which were, strictly speaking, the property of others” (118). Pilling seems to play down the poet’s subjectivity as a contributing factor in the poems’ coming into being. Kusters, on the other hand, duly recognizes in *Echo’s Bones* the tension between exploration of the inner life and immersion in the literary legacy, when he speaks of Beckett’s approach, interweaving “a representation of a mind beset by ‘fatigue and disgust’ (215) with allusions to both the usual (high) modernist suspects (Eliot, Joyce, Proust, Pound) and less obvious intertexts such as Goethe, Walther von der Vogelweide, the French symbolists, and the Provençal troubadours” (130).

The tension between originality and imitation registers throughout the whole collection. The former is observable in linguistic brilliance, ingenious and often scatological punning, deformation of syntax, and inclusion of concrete details, primarily through ample topographical documentation and obscure autobiographical references. This drive toward novelty and distinctiveness is counterbalanced by extensive recycling of earlier literary texts, quotations and paraphrases, by the acknowledgment of the literary tradition. In *Echo’s Bones* the female figure comes in many assorted types, ranging from dead or expiring sweethearts (“Enueg I”, “Enueg II”), through the mother recollected from childhood (“Serena II”), to the lascivious and sultry barmaid (“Sanies II”). None of these, however, can be perceived as a vehicle of spiritual uplift à la Alba or even a gateway to a gratifying, sensual, aesthetic experience, as in “Dortmunder”. Rather it is emphasis on carnality, on bodily functions and fluids, that persists throughout the other poems in this collection. Also, the speakers in these poems remain mired in the mundane and the temporal, failing to achieve a poetic vision or an aesthetic transcendence, and ironically asking for a release in mock-prayers scattered throughout the verses.

Like many other poems in *Echo’s Bones*, “The Vulture”, “Alba”, and “Dortmunder”, exemplify the dilemma of being trapped between two extremes – between the inward turn, which can be provisionally defined as the privileging of self-expression and originality, and the outgoing impulse, carrying the risk of self-effacement and imitation. In order to escape from the trap of the inward-outward polarity, the poet must navigate the difficult waters between the Scylla of self-exposure and exhibition and the Charybdis of self-denial, in the sense of bowing down to the established masters. The way this negotiation between the personal/original and the universal/repetitive is accomplished can best be observed in “The Vulture”, in which detachment from the self and turning consciousness itself into an object are adduced as the condition sine qua non of poetic creation. Obliquely referring to itself and its concerns, the poem discloses the self-reflexive character of Beckett’s poetry, which is further elaborated on in “Alba” and “Dortmunder”. In “Alba”, poetry is conceived of as “a statement of itself drawn across the tempest of emblems”, thus, just as music, it is both self-referential and self-contained. Even though the possibility of transcendence through art is denied at the conclusion of the poem, poetry or art momentarily eclipses the phenomenal world and offers a surrogate salvation. The latter idea is especially propounded in “Dortmunder”, featuring the direct juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane and elaborating on the tension between the artistic sublimation and the sensual entrapment. The poem dramatizes the efficacy of art as a pharmakon, and promotes an aesthetic experience as a palliative to the anguish and turmoil of existence, two notions to which Beckett had remained faithful throughout his long literary career. However, if the Irish writer ever subscribed to the culturally promoted notion of

redemptive art, it was perhaps only in the Nietzschean sense of the term. As Borsani argues, for Nietzsche art was “the truly *metaphysical* activity of man” (quoted in Borsani 94) and “it is only in art, or as art”, Borsani explains, “that the human subject becomes a metaphysical being” (94). Perhaps in Beckett’s view, for the self to achieve through literary representation the status of a metaphysical being was enough to warrant redemption through art.

Notes

¹ All the quotations from Beckett’s poems come from *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, edited by Seán Lawlor and John Pilling, published by Faber and Faber in London in 2012.

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