

The Marginalization of Death in Culture Based on Selected Examples of Modern Literature and Philosophy

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Abstract The thesis that underlies this paper is comprised of a paradox. Although, as modern literature discloses, death has been marginalized in our public life and awareness as well as in humanist discourse, yet simultaneously, according to Theodor Adorno it “has become something which has never yet been so feared.” The paradox leads us to a philosophical re-evaluation of the existential meaning of death after Martin Heidegger and to an investigation of not only the consequences of the marginalization of death but also of the roots of this phenomenon. Our investigation will trace the presence of the phenomenon in selected works of modern literature and philosophy, e.g. Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and Theodor Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, which purposely venture into the margins of public discourse and culture.

Key words marginalization of death; ambiguity of culture; Beckett; Adorno; Heidegger

The very process of marginalization of death is representatively depicted in *The Trial* (1925) by Franz Kafka. Not only the ruthless manner in which Joseph K. is killed but the place is curious, as the very scene is symbolic in all its aspects. In a quarry, outside of town he is stabbed in the heart with a butcher knife in a rather negligent, mechanical manner. There is something wicked and unnerving in his death, the way it becomes depersonalized in its existential aspect—“like a dog!” (Kafka 419) At this point death ceases to be an individual and mystical dimension of existence; instead it becomes a mechanical and administrative act, executed by an ambiguous system rather than a person. Still it is the place where K. is killed that is even more significant. The quarry, a dead and nonhuman place, is set outside of town in an unknown location and thus manifests not only rejection but the marginalization of Joseph K.’s death.

He is a neglected person whose death is of no importance, no meaning—in a way his death is not part of common experience. However, although it is the final scene of the book and naturally reveals itself to us as its conclusion, it also produces a reflection on the root of the absurd chain of events. It forces the reader to recall Joseph K.'s dialogue with priest: "You don't need to accept everything as true, you only need to accept is as necessary". "Depressing view" said K. "The lie made into the rule of the world" (406). This piece of conversation throws a prophetic light on the nature of the mayhem of what appears to be a succession of accidental, irrational happenings patched together with a classical *fatum* acting like a series of consequences that lead K. to his inevitable end. What is the lie that underlies the world? The significance of these words is even greater once it is realized that these words became reality and echo through *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), where Hannah Arendt reports how mass murder had become a matter of necessity and carrying out an order.

The symbolic death of Joseph K. is neither the beginning nor the end of the process of marginalization; the quarry outside of town in *The Trial* turns into an empty road with a tree enclosing two men in an almost magical circle with no way out in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Perhaps even the stranger that appears in the window in K.'s last minutes becomes Godot for Vladimir and Estragon? Or, the quarry might have been the market visited by some madman crying "God is dead!" (*Gott ist tot!*) (Nietzsche 181) in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. Nonetheless, changing from a crowded marketplace into a quarry and finally into an empty road this no-place depicts the here and now of modernity, or rather, a timeless contemporaneity.

1. Existential Analysis of Death: The Ambiguity of Culture

To comprehend the significance of the marginalization of death the meaning of death should be reconsidered. Philosophical hermeneutics conceives man as determined by understanding and thus the main and primal question underlying any cognitive activity is the question of meaning. Firstly, the notion of meaning implies comprehending the overall object—the phenomenon along with its references and context; as such it points to the necessity of reaching a cognitive distance. Secondly, the question of meaning is comprised of "why?" as well as "for what purpose?" Therefore, although the term of understanding as it presents itself in direct reflection appears to be partially entrenched in the past, it is in fact essentially aimed at the future. It is possible because the understanding in Martin Heidegger's opinion intrinsically contains the existential structure of the *Project [Entwurf]*. Thus to *project*—and to exist means to *throw oneself into being*. It suggests that the ecstatic nature of understanding originates in the very nature of man as *Dasein*—being thrown into the world amidst other beings:

“[...] as thrown, Dasein is thrown into the kind of Being which we call projecting.” (Heidegger 185)

The *Thrownness [Geworfenheit]* allows us to understand *Dasein* as openness towards the world and the beings in it through the creative activity of changing the world into a civilized and less hostile environment. In this respect understanding means to surpass the strangeness of the world.

Nevertheless *Dasein* is above all *Being-Towards-Death [Sein zum Tode]*, that is, living and dying at the same time. Man is the only being aware of its finitude. Thus the experience of mortality is the foundation of the understanding mode of *Dasein's* being in its endeavor to comprehend the wholeness of the self which involves *running ahead [Vorlaufen]* into the future.

When one understands oneself projectively in an existential possibility, the future underlies this understanding, and it does so as a coming-towards-onself but of that current possibility as which one's *Dasein* exists. The future makes ontologically possible an entity which is in such a way that it exists understandingly in its potentiality-for-Being. (385)

Dasein comes to itself in the ecstasy of the future, the final horizon that is always death as the innate possibility of being. *Running ahead [Vorlaufen]* into the future provides a distance necessary to totally experience oneself as a whole. However, it is unattainable, since death is never entirely present while one is living. Therefore, understanding oneself as a whole is a process and its self-awareness is always suspended, as “there belongs to *Dasein*, as long as it is, a “not yet” which it will be—that which is constantly still outstanding.” (286)

Moreover, the very experiencing of death and one's finitude is a rather intricate matter and not easily gained in everyday life. According to Heidegger we experience our finitude only in situations where we experience anxiety [*die Angst*] and the problem of meaning present in it as well.

Thrownness into death reveals itself to *Dasein* in a more primordial and impressive manner in that state-of-mind which we have called “anxiety”. Anxiety in the face of death is anxiety “in face of” that potentiality-for-Being which is one's ownmost, nonrelational, and not to be outstripped. That in the face of which one has anxiety is Being-in-the-world itself. That about which one has this anxiety is simply *Dasein's* potentiality-for-Being. Anxiety in the face of death must not be confused with fear in the face of one's demise. (295)

In anxiety [*Angst*] death presents itself to man as the impassable and as an immanent possibility; therefore the very situation is marked with immense loneliness. However, the impact of this loneliness does not simply mean being abandoned by people but means touching the very *nothingness* [*das Nichts*] - the void in which what slips away is everything as wholeness, and *Dasein* finds itself incapable of affirming the notion of the self as an individual being.

Holding itself out into the nothing, *Dasein* is in each case already beyond beings as a whole. This being beyond beings we call “transcendence.” If in the ground of its essence *Dasein* were not transcending, which now means, if it were not in advance holding itself out into the nothing, then it could never be related to beings nor even to itself. Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom. (Heidegger 105-106)

In *Angst* the state of awareness of *Dasein* is awakened, as its appropriate [*eigentlich*] mode of existence, that is as a being [*Sein*] aware of the self. *Dasein* attains a distance towards the being and the self and thus is enabled to see, almost touch, the self. Being as world [*Welt*] is recognized as an instrumental construction and slips away. This way the experience of *Angst* is essentially an individual experience; a fundamental mood [*Stimmung*] reveals the truth of *Dasein* transcendence and distance.

However, another modern writer Witold Gombrowicz points out that the experience of *Angst* is also a primal experience of the absurd: “Anxiety is fear of nothing, of no-meaning. We fear that we might not give meaning to the world and lose ourselves.”(Gombrowicz 607)¹ The above understanding of *Angst* in opposition to fear which is always founded in something threatening one’s life corresponds with Heidegger claim “That in the face of which one is anxious is completely indefinite.” (Heidegger 231) Nevertheless, Gombrowicz identifies the “nothing” with the absurd as no-meaning. How to understand the fear of no-meaning? According to Heidegger understanding consists of human beings projecting their mode of existence. For *Dasein* understands the world and the self by projecting, that is by running ahead into the future and thus reaching itself again by returning to the self. *Dasein* is the project as possibility thrown into the world, and therefore it exists in a constant desire to understand the self and the world. The source of this desire is a primal lack, the absence of meaning in the present moment. The “now” of *Dasein* is always marked with lack, deficiency of both the world and the self. Heidegger emphasizes: “In *Dasein* there is undeniably a constant ‘lack of totality’ which finds an end with death.” (286) The very factuality of existence excludes experiencing meaning as the

wholeness of “here and now”, and *Angst* reveals this deficiency.

In the light of the above analysis death appears to be a source of meaning in human existence; however, its essence is never present. Thus it resembles a mirror, which - although reflecting the light - is itself concealed in darkness. If we were to understand the light in accordance to its metaphorical relevance as reason then what appears in this light would be the world of men—culture as a sphere of meanings created by man. The experience of the absence of meaning constitutes the source of all creative activity.

In order to confirm this thesis Hans-Georg Gadamer investigates the oldest story about the light and the beginning of culture—the myth of Prometheus. However, what is found is a paradox. Gadamer emphasizes the ambiguity of the Promethean gift of fire, since on the one hand it enables humankind to evolve whereas on the other hand it continuously conceals a tragic inner contradiction and reveals the culture as a de facto flight from finitude and death. It is in the nature of fire to allow things to be seen and recognized. However, the reverse side of the moment of recognition is the inevitability of the simultaneous disappearance of other things. The situation is easily illustrated in making fire in the woods, when a great quantity of things escape the circle of light and become even more impenetrable for one’s eye. From this moment all human performances no matter how great amount to the struggle to live.

Thus culture can be understood as both the human expression of self-understanding and as a flight from finitude. Based on the latter, dark side of culture we find Heidegger’s critique of culture as a sphere of public life in which *Dasain* falls into habit [*Das Man*]*—the wrong mode of existence.*

As falling, everyday Being-towards-death is a constant *fleeting in the face of death*. Being-towards-the-end has the mode of *evasion in the face of it*—giving new explanations of it, understanding it inauthentically, and concealing it. [...] *Even in average everydayness, this ownmost potentiality-for-Being, which is non-relational and not to be outstripped, is constantly an issue for Dasein. This is the case its concern is merely in the mode of an untroubled indifference towards the uttermost possibility of existence.* (298-299)

The everydayness of public life and culture does not discredit the fact of finitude but it twists it. Death is still present in the common public discourse but in an erroneous way that conceals its essence. To speak of death in the public sphere is in fact “cowardly fear, a sign of insecurity on the part of Dasein, and a somber way of fleeing from the world” (298). It is always inappropriate to leave the circle of light and wander into the abyssal darkness of non-existence.

2. Dead Voices on the Empty Road

It seems that the reality of falling into habit [*Das Man*], as a mental image, is ingenuously depicted in *Waiting for Godot*.

VLADIMIR: All I know is that hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which—how shall I say—which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering. No doubt. But has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths? That's what I sometimes wonder. You follow my reasoning?

ESTRAGON: [Aphoristic for once.] We all are born mad. Some remain so. (Beckett 72-73)

Vladimir in the above words describes almost the entire content of the play from the point of view of an action. “Hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which [...] may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit” (72)—what does it mean?

ESTRAGON: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?

VLADIMIR: [Impatiently.] Yes, yes, we're magicians. (61)

It may appear that these proceedings are in fact a camouflage, a struggle to give what is a semblance of real existence—meaning and through that to provide a foundation for their own subsistence and the possibility of experiencing it. Analogically, according to Heidegger, falling into habitual existence [*Das Man*] is only a semblance of authentic being—a parody of this state and of understanding. The picture we observe in the drama depicts nothing at all, a void.

POZZO: What is it like?

VLADIMIR: [Looking around.] It's indescribable. It's like nothing. There's nothing. There's a tree. (79)

Of course there is a tree, a field and a road around Vladimir and Estragon, thus the space seems to be filled up; however, what is experienced is an overwhelming nothingness. Everything appears to be nothing as it is devoid of meaning. Hence in light of the above comments *Waiting for Godot* reminds one of an erroneous game.

The game or play is Gadamer's concept of the mode of existence of an artistic phenomenon, which is bound to reveal a momentary truth—"what is". What does erroneous mean? It means a play devoid of the essential moment of truth—revealing reality, the "what is". The characters created by Beckett seem to float in egotistical suspension, utterly detached from reality. This state is reflected in their ambiguous future and in the waiting for the vague figure of Godot. In this play, although all the formal aspects are present, there is no moment of truth. In Gadamer's locution it would signify a confirmation of community as the most concealed basis of human existence. We should therefore ask: why would Beckett present a play devoid of truth? Or perhaps the more primal question is: What is being presented?

Firstly, what is outside as well as inside the characters is not a simple and obvious matter for Beckett. It is significant that the characters have been universalized along with the space on stage. Therefore there is a significant resemblance with the works of Franz Kafka, for whom Joseph K. is simultaneously nobody and everybody, and so an *Everyman*. However, what does the universalisation consists in if not in wresting something from the observer that is existentially closest to him—the cause of the most inner and intimate dilemma as it emerges from the human condition? Admittedly, Schopenhauer claims that the most excellent form of tragic work of art should reveal before us the identity of the fate of the characters and ours, so that we may experience that "we feel ourselves already in the middle of the hell". (Schopenhauer 282). Still, Beckett and Kafka seem to proceed further and present the character's fate as not only an approximate and possible mode of existence but also as a revelation of the absurd as the actual state of things. Beckett's proceedings as a playwright are quite precise, as in *Waiting for Godot* alone he reduces scenic means to the basic minimum, while in his last works we face the absolute degradation of characters to disturbed voices. As Proust, Beckett's inspiration, wrote:

The only business of art is to penetrate something inside oneself. What intelligence presents as the past is not the past. (Hayman 33)

Hence the critics often point out that characters in Beckett's plays frequently reflect the same disintegrated personality, constantly seeking itself:

In *Waiting for Godot* resonance depends partly on the impression that the central argument is going on inside a single consciousness [...] The components which normally give opacity to drama have been so attenuated that we can see a consciousness arguing with itself. (4)

Therefore, in the world of the author of *Waiting for Godot* where the outside is a reflection of the inside the main motif is not only the relation of a man to the others but to himself as well.

What is the nature of that *exteriorized insideness*? What does Beckett discover about human beings? He definitely confirms what Proust and Joyce claimed—that man is nothing but a disappearing flow of thoughts:

The individual is the set of a constant process of decantation, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicolored by the phenomena of its hours. (Esslin 30)

Ronald Hayman notices that not only the dialogues among characters, but the very course of action reflects a course of thought, and the degradation of scenic means emphasizes the all-encompassing process of the stream of consciousness:

Becket's use of the medium has been determined by the same overwhelming need that is evident in his novels, the need to investigate the non-stop flow that goes on inside our heads, mixing words (heard, spoken and remembered) with images (observed, remembered and evoked). (Hayman 9)

What does its absurdity consist in? Martin Esslin would argue that in the quandary and the inability to find oneself reside the infinite waiting of the subject. The situation thus resembles Jaspers' dilemma: man is torn between the longing of transcendence and need of becoming. However, the resonance of *Waiting for Godot* seems to reach much deeper if one inquires: who is Godot? Again Esslin would argue that the identity of Godot is irrelevant since the waiting is the main theme of the play. God-ot—purposely not God, but rather a mere reminiscence of God; that is, logos is thought to contribute some meaning and aim to the existence of Vladimir and Estragon. The idea corresponds to Witkacy's (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz) conception of characters in the modern theatre. In *New Forms in Painting. Aesthetic Sketches* Witkiewicz claims that characters are to become symbols of the Mystery of Existence showing trough, as remembrances of the religious rites in which theatre originates. However, the symbol is deliberately deformed: "God-ot". Furthermore, it contributes nothing more apart from approaching oblivion to the fate of the characters. If we were to follow the sound of the name rather than graphics we would perhaps hear an echo of Nietzsche's "Gott ist tot!" Significantly, according to Karl Jaspers' analysis of Nietzsche's work, the phrase "death of God" does not aim to name

the fact; rather, it reveals the condition of common public awareness which falls into habitual, schematic religious thinking devoid of real sacrum. I believe that there is a clue to understanding *Waiting for Godot* in the words of Vladimir: [...] Astride of grave and difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. [He listens]. But habit is great deadener. [He looks again at Estragon.] At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Beckett 83)

Perhaps Vladimir's words are there to convey Esslin's conviction about the desertion of faith, or rather about the absurdity of faith, and thereby of hope as well which underlies the very act of waiting.

The act of waiting is essentially *absurd*. Admittedly it might be a case of '*Credere quia absurdum est*', yet it might even more forcibly be taken as a demonstration of the proposition '*Absurdum est credere*'. (Esslin 35)

However, the second part of Vladimir's speech contradicts this assertion, as he implies belief of being observed and judged and through it he reveals a constant awareness of transcendence. Is it the spectator? Perhaps. Nevertheless it seems more adequate that we experience the resonance of Camus' everyday Doom and throughout it the clear call for truth. It might be noticed that in Vladimir the consciousness of the play is present as his first question: „Was I sleeping while the others suffered?“ seems to open the third sphere of the situation presented, not entirely elucidated but where the truth is nevertheless revealed, or to use Gadamer's locution "what is". What is the reality concealed underneath the unimportant gestures and blabbing—the apparently erroneous play?

Another trace appears as we may pursue a further vital question—"But in all that what truth will there be?" (Beckett 83) It indicates that Vladimir seems to be aware of the theatrical character of what is around him—he is aware of the *play*. But his question reaches deeper than presenting the artificial assertion of what is happening—it touches the true nature of the ultimate play of which Vladimir himself is a part. Notably, Vladimir also talks about forgotten or perhaps unnoticed suffering and the play is a result of this.

It appears a paradox that meaningless proceedings that constitute the game presented in Beckett's drama are to fill up the time of waiting for Godot. Corresponding to the action of the drama the dialogues are devoid of any apparent meaning, yet this talking nonsense is constantly presented and examined and not

without reason:

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't think.

VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't here.

VLADIMIR: We have our reasons.

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices. (53-54)

At first sight talking nonsense appears to be what Heidegger calls patter, which signifies the time of straying when Being is concealed. But the above dialogue of Vladimir and Estragon continues and merges into a subconscious monologue that purposely drowns out the “dead voices”, thus indicating the underlying mystery. Whose voices are they talking about? Vladimir continues: “To all mankind were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears!” (72)

3. A Lifelong Death Sentence

That existence directly points to the factuality of death seems to be the thesis and source of Samuel Beckett's artistic activity, as out of the recognition of the primal dialectics of existence the image of chaos and the absurd emerges. As an artist he speaks about the vital truth about man in modernity and his relation to death.

What is, is like the concentration-camp. Once he [Beckett] speaks of a lifelong death-sentence. The only hope, faintly dawning, is that there would be nothing anymore. This too he rejects. Out of the fissure of inconsistency formed by this, the image-world of nothingness appears as something which tethers his poetry. (Adorn 369-374)

It appears that Adorno's conclusion is coherent with Vladimir's words “The air is full of our cries” (Beckett 83). What does, then, the paradox of “a life death sentence” mean? Beckett in his plays depicts the world of the living in a state of death—a fake living for which non-living appears as hopeful end only. However, to fulfill this hope would be to run away—the option which even Vladimir and Estragon fail to accomplish. Thus, according to Adorno, the works of Beckett are evidence of the genuine struggle of authentic nihilism, as he endows the absurdity of nothingness with artistic suspension and sustenance and hence forces it to signify something. Therefore, *nothing to be done* sounds like a mantra throughout the play, enchanting the reality depicted in *Waiting for Godot* and making it into an image of lifeless barrenness except for the *tree*, the insignificant *name* of the unknown. To be sure,

in the lines cited above Adorno refers to the even more cruel reality of *Endgame*; however, the degradation of the stage's reality is a constant and consistent process in Beckett's plays starting with *Waiting for Godot*. Ironically, the essential sentence of the play is repeated continuously: "There's nothing to do" (66), as the expression of the utterly powerless state of the characters in face of the play's truth.

The experience and notion of *katharsis*, as the purpose of the tragic work of art implies that in fact the work of art is constituted as an act of the subject's cognitive activity. However, the notion of purification reveals the underlying dialogical nature of the work of art owing to not so much the constitutive power of the cognitive act as to its emotional echo; this echo fulfills the wholeness of the work of art. Adorno describes Beckett's world as follows:

In the legacy of its treatment, of the apparently stoical carrying-on, what is noiselessly screamed is that things ought to be different. Such nihilism implies the opposite of the identification with nothingness. (Adorno 369-374)

As a result of interiorizing the reality previously described as tragic—the exposure of hell as here and now—we reach Nietzsche's negation understood as distance:

Gnostically, it regards the world as it has been created as radically evil and its repudiation the possibility of a different, not yet existent one. So long as the world is as it is, then all images of reconciliation, peace and quiet resemble those of death. The smallest difference between nothingness and that which has come to rest, would be the refuge of hope, the no-man's-land between the borderposts of being and nothingness. From that zone needs to be extricated, instead of overcoming, the consciousness of what the alternative would have no power over. Nihilists are those, who oppose nihilism with their more and more washed-out positivities, conspiring by means of these with all existent malice and finally with the destructive principle. What honors thought, is defending what nihilism is castigated as. (369-374)

In the lines cited above Adorno raises two vital accusations which may be reformulated into two theses: that Auschwitz was a fact and, what seems even more important and yet distressing, that this fact always will be socially possible. The crime against humanity was done in a death camp in spite of the enlightenment identified with culture; what is more, this possibility in fact arose in the light of a mythical Promethean fire. At this point Vladimir's words may be quoted again:

VLADIMIR: All I know is that hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which—how shall I say—which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering. No doubt. But has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths? That's what I sometimes wonder. (Beckett 72-73)

In Vladimir's question the problem of the tragedy of culture in its flight from death recurs. It appears as though one who is fearful of something and flees from it paradoxically always carries it with him. The mind of a person who in fear of darkness starts a fire is constantly immersed in darkness. Therefore the entire sphere of the enlightened spirit, the humanistic sciences, veils the negation of death in the very 'truth' of enlightenment—it is in fact an escape from truth and thus Adorno may conclude: "In those branches themselves, in the emphatic claim of their autarchy, dwells untruth." (Adorno 358-361)

This is why, the author of *Negative Dialectics* claims, Auschwitz was possible; the detachment from the truth of death was revealed in the veiled face of culture.

With the murder of millions through administration, death has become something which has never yet been so feared. No possibility anymore, that it could enter into the experienced lives of individuals as something somehow concordant with its course. The individuated is expropriated of the final and most impoverished thing which remained to it. That the individual [Individuum] no longer died in the concentration camps, but rather the exemplar, has to affect the dying of those who escaped the administrative measures. (354-358)

In the twisted reality of concentration camps the existential phenomenon of death became subject to total rationalization. Death became an accountable matter and a subject of pure administration. The impact of Auschwitz as a realized social possibility does not terminate at the simple historical fact that it was and ergo is possible. Death in the horizon of culture has attained a mode of becoming exemplary instead of being individual, even if society will never again provide the required administrative means. In other words: my own death can always become nothing more than a statistic data when the instinct to survive is hidden in public life.

Note

1. The translation is made by the author of this article.

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