INTRODUCTION

A Literature of the Unword

"And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it." So wrote Samuel Beckett in July 1937, shortly after his return from a six-month trip to Nazi Germany, where he had spent much of his time looking at paintings in both public and private collections. In part a response to the proposal that he undertake the translation of works by the German writer and painter Joachim Ringelnatz, Beckett's letter to Axel Kaun (whose acquaintance he had made in Germany) also provided him with the opportunity to outline, in German, his own emerging conception of literature. That conception was grounded in the idea that, far from being an effective means of expression or a way of mapping the world, language obstructs access both to the outer and to the inner realms. Given this, the writer's task becomes the rending of the language veil, or, varying the metaphor, the boring of holes in language, "until that which lurks behind it, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through." In the literary work, the "terrifyingly arbitrary materiality" of language must, Beckett insists, be "dissolved." He goes on to declare that he "cannot imagine a higher goal for today's writer" than the practice of such linguistic undoing, for which the most suitable comparisons are to be found not in literature but in music. The result would be what he describes as a "literature of the unword" (*Literatur des Unworts*), diametrically opposed to James Joyce's "apotheosis of the word" in the work that at the time was known only as "Work in Progress," but that two years later, on the eve of World War II, would be published under the title *Finnegans Wake*.[1]

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[1] Samuel Beckett, letter to Axel Kaun, July 9, 1937, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: 1929–1940*, ed. Martha Fehsenfeld and Lois Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 518–20 (English); pp. 513–15 (German). For an analysis of Beckett's activities in Germany in 1936–7, see especially Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries, 1936–1937* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

The profound language skepticism that prompts Beckett to make the case for such a literature of the unword has its roots in the second half of the nineteenth century and casts its long shadow across the twentieth-century European literary landscape. Two of its most eloquent early literary and philosophical articulations occur at the beginning of that century, with the almost simultaneous publication of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Lord Chandos Letter* (1902) and Fritz Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* ("Contributions to a Critique of Language," 1901–2), the former only a few eloquent pages in length, the latter a hefty three volumes in which Mauthner tackles the entire history of Western philosophy from a language-skeptical vantage point.

The forces behind that language skepticism – behind the sense that, far from being an effective means of communication, far from granting us access to the world, language is in fact a hindrance, something to be undone – are, however, neither purely literary nor purely philosophical in nature. Indeed, the language crisis with which Beckett and other major European writers both before and after him would find themselves obliged to struggle can only begin to be understood when one considers the sociopolitical context in which it arises. That context is a modernity increasingly seen in negative terms. As the twentieth century unfolded, the language crisis would only be exacerbated as modernity came to be considered by various European writers and thinkers as nothing short of catastrophic. That the two most important early articulations of this language crisis should have come from a German-language context is significant. For it was precisely in central Europe, with the waning of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the rise of nationalisms that championed national languages over any lingua franca, that German-language writers and philosophers increasingly found themselves obliged to question the power – at once literary, political, and philosophical – of any historical language. By articulating his own language skepticism in a letter written in German, and thereby echoing Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, Beckett locates himself squarely within this tradition, as had Franz Kafka before him.

The increasing political instabilities in central Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century would in due course play a decisive role in triggering World War I, the consequences of which would in turn trigger the rise of totalitarianism in Russia and Germany, World War II, and the Holocaust. Among European writers and thinkers, this sequence of catastrophic historical events would prompt an ever more radical questioning not only of the idea of European culture, but also of the European

Enlightenment conception of the human being as an essentially rational animal, and of human history as a progress toward ever greater levels of civilization and individual freedom. And it would also significantly exacerbate the sense that existing literary forms, modes of expression, and even language as such were wholly inadequate to articulate the experience of modernity. Beckett's own profound skepticism regarding both language and the possibility of any genuine progress, be it social, political, or cultural, is but one, albeit particularly acute, manifestation of this pessimistic intellectual current.

From the outset, this language crisis, and the negative conception of modernity underlying it, prompted a profound reaction in the literary sphere, the first major literary response to it coming with the emergence of the Symbolist movement, and most notably with the publication of Mallarmé's late poem *A Throw of the Dice* (1897), published just over a year before his death. In the interwar years, that language crisis, significantly exacerbated by the catastrophe of world war, would lie behind the widespread attempts by the historical avant-garde and the more aesthetically (and often politically) radical modernists to achieve forms of linguistic renewal that were considered the prerequisite for any genuine cultural renewal. Those various, highly innovative attempts at linguistic renewal were trans-European in nature and lay at the heart of Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism, while also shaping the work of writers as diverse as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Djuna Barnes, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Hermann Broch, reaching their most extreme incarnation in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Ten years before the publication of Joyce's novel, Eugene Jolas characterized Joyce's linguistic practice in what would prove to be his final work as a "revolution of language."[2] This was far from being the only linguistic revolution of the period, however, for in their distinctive ways the various interwar avant-garde movements, as well as modernist writers more generally, responded to the perceived breakdown in the relation between word and world, to the sense that existing linguistic forms were no longer adequate to articulate the extremity of the experience of modernity, by turning against those linguistic forms.[3]

[2] See Eugene Jolas, "The Revolution of Language and James Joyce," in Samuel Beckett et al., *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 77–92. Jolas's essay was originally published in 1929.

[3] On the modernist language revolution, see, for example, Ben Hutchinson, *Modernism and Style* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, New Edition (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), which includes chapters on Stein, Pound, and Beckett; and Richard Sheppard, *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

If the work of many of the European modernists of the interwar years was haunted by the sense that the language that had served the aims of a realist aesthetic in the nineteenth century had become wholly inadequate, this was not simply because "making it new" was considered to be a transhistorical aesthetic imperative, but rather because they found themselves having to face a modernity increasingly experienced as dehumanizing and alienating in ways that had resulted in a wholescale crisis of representation.[4] This dehumanization was seen as being wrought not only by totalitarianism – there were some among the avant-garde and in modernism more generally who were far from critical of Stalinist Russia, Fascist Italy, or Nazi Germany – but also by the increasingly administrated nature of capitalist democratic societies. Hannah Arendt speaks for precisely this view of modernity when she asserts that "the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs out of men, and thus to dehumanize them."[5] In their attempt to achieve a linguistic renewal that would enable literature to capture the nature of this new historical reality, and, no less importantly, to make possible, or at the very least lay the groundwork for, a wider cultural renewal, both the avant-garde and the more aesthetically radical among the interwar modernists committed themselves to linguistic innovations that would break dramatically with any sense of a consensual relation between writer and reader, and, in some cases, even of a shared language. Rather, these linguistic revolutions required the literary re-education of the reader. Difficulty became the value of values, and the (generally bourgeois) reader's struggle to understand the literary work the index of its power to achieve its aims.

Within this broad, varied, and complex tradition of radical linguistic renewal in the early decades of the twentieth century, which embraced many forms of innovative linguistic practice, including the macaronic, extreme variations in register, a turn toward non-European languages, and even the invention of new languages (as in Dada "sound poems" or the incantations of Antonin Artaud), and which also extended across the political spectrum, from the far left to the far right, there emerged a distinctive strain of radical literary practice that, while profoundly modernist in spirit, responded to the language crisis, and to the modernity of which it was the sign, in a manner that placed the emphasis

[4] For helpful overviews of the nature of this crisis in representation, see Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 3–10; and Sheppard, *Modernism*, pp. 89–100.

[5] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann and the Holocaust* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 2005), p. 117.

squarely upon the negative. This literary strain would recognize the full force of the language crisis but would react to it, not through any form of positive linguistic renewal, but rather through a practice of *linguistic negativism* in the forms of parataxis, fragmentation, intensive epanorthosis, and the repeated deployment of negative affixes, negative modifiers, and particles of negation. While linguistically innovative, this linguistic negativism would make of the literary work both an experience of the language crisis and the attempt to achieve the seemingly impossible, turning language back against itself not just to highlight its failings but also to make of this very negation the privileged form in which to articulate the experience of a dark modernity and to take a critical distance from it. This linguistic negativism thus served a threefold purpose: the enactment of language skepticism in the language of the literary work; the representation of experience by way of the negative, in accordance with the principle that any positive representation of the experience of modernity would be a deformation of that experience; and a critique, either explicit or implicit, of modernity because of what was seen as its dehumanizing and alienating effects.

This practice of linguistic negativism would result in what, taking up Beckett's term, may be described as a *literature of the unword*, which, in the interwar years, would find its most extreme incarnation in the later works of Franz Kafka, before undergoing a significant proliferation and intensification in the post–World War II period, in response to an ever darker picture of European modernity at the heart of which lay the scarcely imaginable horror of the Holocaust.[6] While Kafka's later work stands as the most fully realized instance of this literature of the unword in the interwar period, the practice of linguistic negativism that becomes ever more intensive in his writing is also to be found, in distinct forms, in the work of numerous other writers of the period, from Antonin Artaud to Georges Bataille, from T. S. Eliot to Hermann Broch. Often, however, this linguistic negativism serves a subordinate purpose. On the one hand, it is deployed to clear the ground for new linguistic forms. The radical linguistic negativism in Dada, for instance, opens the way for the production of "sound poems" characterized by their break with all historical languages.

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[6] This literature of the unword is distinct from Claude Mauriac's idea of an "aliterature" that would find its first full modern articulation in Kafka, and whose later practitioners would include Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, Henri Michaux, and Samuel Beckett, for Mauriac's conception of "aliterature" is one in which the avant-garde elements serve to overcome the pejorative sense that has accrued to the term *literature*, with the emphasis not being upon any form of linguistic negativism as such. See Claude Mauriac, *L'Alittérature contemporaine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1958).

The most extreme form of such linguistic renewal emerging out of a skeptical attitude to existing languages is undoubtedly *Finnegans Wake*. On the other hand, this linguistic negativism can serve, as it does in Eliot's postconversion poetry, to articulate a crucial distinction between two forms of language – the human and the divine.

If Kafka's later work, above all that of the years 1922 to 1924, stands out as the most fully realized form of this literature of the unword in the interwar years, in the post–World War II period its decisive instantiations include works by Samuel Beckett, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Celan, and W. G. Sebald. In their distinctive ways, each of these writers embraces the categorical imperative articulated by Kafka in one of his Zürau aphorisms, written in 1917–18, shortly after he had been diagnosed with tuberculosis and at a time when central Europe was feeling the full force of a disastrous war: "To perform the negative is what is still required of us, the positive is already ours."[7] In their work, as in Kafka's, linguistic negativism is not subordinated either to a new language that would emerge out of it, or to a realizable "silence" that would transcend it. And just as the valorization of such a silence remains foreign to the literature of the unword, so too does Arthur Rimbaud's withdrawal from the literary altogether.[8] Rather, there is in this literature of the unword a tarrying with the linguistically negative as what is taken, for far more than merely aesthetic reasons, to be the only inhabitable literary space.

For all its unremitting negativism, this literature of the unword is less a flight from than a critique of modernity, and the increasing horrors that make of that modernity what Sebald, in the final decade of the twentieth century, terms an *historia calamitatum*.[9] For the intensive linguistic negativism that is characteristic of this literature of the unword serves as a means not only to depict a time and an experience seen as beggaring the word, but also to enact a form of resistance to it, albeit one that remains deeply suspicious of the apocalyptic utopianism that underlies the very negations that it enacts linguistically.[10] Adorno's notion of the negative image is helpful for an understanding of the critical function of the linguistic

[7] Franz Kafka, *The Collected Aphorisms*, trans. Malcolm Pasley (London: Syrens, 1994), p. 8; *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II, in der Fassung der Handschriften*, ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1992), pp. 47, 119. This aphorism was composed in November 1917.

[8] On the idea of such a withdrawal into literary silence, see George Steiner, "The Retreat from the Word," in *Language and Silence* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), pp. 30–54.

[9] W. G. Sebald, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks. Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994), p. 12.

[10] In this respect, Peter Fifield's conception of "late modernism" offers insight into the nature of the literature of the unword. According to Fifield, late modernist literature, which he sees as emerging in

negativism that is characteristic of this modern European literature of the unword. According to Adorno, what distinguishes Beckett's work from that of many of his European modernist contemporaries is precisely its refusal to offer any utopian vision while never simply abandoning the utopian spirit of the European avant-garde. In postwar works such as *The Unnamable* (1953) and *Endgame* (1957), Adorno finds Beckett presenting Western civilization with the most clear-eyed vision of a modernity in which the bourgeois category of the self-determining individual has become mere semblance and in which the logic of instrumentalized reason is dominant. Rather than seeking to reinstate or even to preserve what remains of the Enlightenment concept of the rational, self-fashioning individual, however, Beckett's works constitute an "anthropological sketch" that presents us with the dark reality of this dismantled subject. Taking up in dialectical fashion Baudelaire's view that the essence of modernity lies in the ephemeral,[11] Adorno identifies the individual as an "historical category, both the outcome of the capitalist process of alienation and a defiant protest against it, something transient."[12] Hollowed-out subjectivity is precisely what Beckett's œuvre puts on display, according to Adorno, but in a manner that offers the reader or, in the case of the plays, the spectator a negative image of that utopia conceived by the apocalyptic imagination that shaped many of the avant-garde movements of the interwar years. As Adorno puts it in his 1961 essay on *Endgame*: "The Beckettian situations of which his drama is composed are the photographic negative of a reality referred to meaning."[13] In other words, meaning is signaled by meaninglessness, hope by despair. Adorno's championing first of Kafka's work and then of Beckett's in the

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the post–World War II era in Europe, responds to historical disaster of a very particular kind, and above all to the Holocaust; see Peter Fifield, *Late Modernist Style in Samuel Beckett and Emmanuel Levinas* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Other influential theorizations of late modernism, each of which proposes a distinct late modernist canon and distinct historical parameters, include: Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999); Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002); Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Charles Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Adorno's Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); and C. D. Blanton, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). The very diversity of these various takes on late modernism suggests that the concept is very far having been sufficiently stabilized such that it might serve as a relatively unproblematic critical tool.

[11] See Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995).

[12] Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," in *Notes to Literature, Volume One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicolsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 241–75 (p. 249).

[13] Ibid., p. 253.

1950s and 1960s is grounded in this idea that it is only by way of the negative that a modernity perceived as catastrophic can be seen for what it is, and thereby an alternative to what Adorno sees as the "radical evil" of modernity be glimpsed. So great are the similarities that Adorno finds between Kafka's and Beckett's work in this respect that he is led to use precisely the same image for the human experience articulated in those respective œuvres: that of a fly that has been squashed, but that is not yet quite dead.

In the post–World War II period, the proliferating commitment to a literature of the unword, characterized by what Sebald describes as unconditional negativity,[14] and enacted at the level of form and style as much as at that of content, is in no small measure the result of a perceived failure of various, more positive forms of linguistic renewal to achieve their ends in the interwar years. For the modern European literature of the unword emerges, and then proliferates and intensifies, in the face of an unfolding catastrophe that the European avant-garde and modernism more generally could not only do little to prevent, but, in some of their philosophico-political as well as literary forms, did much, if not to bring about, then at the very least to endorse.

While there were many among the avant-garde and modernism more generally in the interwar years who were of a strongly left-wing persuasion, most notably among the Dadaists and Surrealists,[15] there were also some among the most aesthetically radical who aligned themselves with a far-right politics that would in due course prove to be catastrophic. Ezra Pound's literary modernism is far from being at odds with his commitment to Italian Fascism. Wyndham Lewis's appreciation of Hitler, in a work published in 1931, before the Nazis had come to power,[16] Eliot's early sympathies for the far-right movement Action Française, Blanchot's revolutionary nationalism in the 1930s, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle's espousal of Fascism and anti-Semitism in the 1930s and his subsequent collaboration with the German Occupation, and Céline's virulent anti-Semitism, as expressed not in his novels but in his

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[14] See W. G. Sebald, "Against the Irreversible: On Jean Améry," in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), pp. 147–71 (p. 154; translation modified); "Mit den Augen des Nachtvogels. Über Jean Amery," in *Campo Santo*, ed. Sven Meyer (Munich and Vienna: Carl Hanser, 2003), pp. 149–70 (pp. 157–58).

[15] On the relation between the avant-garde movements and socialism, see in particular Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[16] See Wyndham Lewis, *Hitler* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931). Lewis later changed his position on Hitler (whom in his 1931 book he describes with an astounding lack of foresight as a "man of peace"), this change being reflected in *The Hitler Cult* (London: J. M. Dent, 1939).

pamphlets during the late 1930s and early 1940s – most notably, *Trifles for a Massacre* (1937), *L'École des cadavres* ("The School for Corpses," 1938), and *Les Nouveaux Draps* ("The Fine Mess," 1941) – are further instances, among many others, of fateful modernist ventures into the political.[17] Indeed, Nazism may itself be seen as one of the principal forms of political modernism, not least in its invocation of myth as a means of shaping a new conception of the nation.[18] Heidegger's philosophical modernism, which entails a thoroughgoing revolution in philosophical language, cannot easily be kept apart from his active support for Nazism in the early 1930s.[19] One need only think of his so-called Black Notebooks of the 1930s, which contain instances of unambiguous anti-Semitism, or Pound's preoccupation with usury in the *Cantos*, to appreciate the extent to which certain strains of what Frank Kermode terms apocalyptic early modernism are profoundly implicated in the political revolutions that would lead to the murder of millions.[20]

The linguistic negativism that is the distinctive characteristic of the modern European literature of the unword as it develops and proliferates in the post–World War II era is shaped in no small part by the writers' grasp of this relation between the kinds of apocalyptic mythical thinking to be found in some strains of literary modernism and sociopolitical monstrosity.[21] In this respect, in the post–World War II period the

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[17] On the politics of these modernists, see in particular: Tim Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Leon Surette, *Pound in Purgatory: From Economic Radicalism to Anti-Semitism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Matthew Feldman, *Ezra Pound's Fascist Propaganda, 1935–1945* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*, Illustrated Edition (London and New York: Verso, 2008); Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994); Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jeffrey Mehlman, *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Robert Soucy, *Fascist Intellectual: Drieu La Rochelle* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1992); and Annick Durafour and Pierre-André Taguieff, *Céline, la race, le juif. Légende littéraire et vérité historique* (Paris: Fayard, 2017).

[18] See Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[19] On the relation between Heidegger's philosophical thinking and his politics, see, for instance, Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933–1935*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

[20] On the relation between modernism and apocalyptic thinking, see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

[21] Fredric Jameson considers this loss of faith in the power of art to remain autonomous from ideology to be a principal characteristic of late modernism. See Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 198, 209.

literature of the unword is increasingly shaped by a skepticism not only toward language as such, but also toward the idea of literature's autonomy from ideology, and the power of the literary to enable sociopolitical change.

Thus, in historical terms, while there are important instances of this literature of the unword in the interwar years, above all in Kafka's later works, alongside a more widespread language skepticism in modernism more generally, the full flowering of this literary strain across western Europe occurs in the wake of Hitler's coming to power, the breakdown of any coherent sense of European culture as shaped by Enlightenment ideals, a second world war, and the Holocaust. For many of the post–World War II practitioners of this literature of the unword, including (a politically transformed) Maurice Blanchot, Edmond Jabès, Nelly Sachs, Paul Celan, and W. G. Sebald, the Holocaust came in due course to represent the most extreme form of the unspeakable – in both senses of the word – and this event would profoundly shape their particular forms of unwording.[22] For almost all of the major post–World War II writers who commit themselves to intensive forms of linguistic negativism, Kafka's later work proves to be a – if not *the* – decisive influence.

In its turning of its own means of expression back against those means, the literature of the unword is in a very particular sense necessarily a literature of belatedness.[23] Epanorthosis, for instance, involves a stating, and then the revision or, in the most extreme cases – in works by Kafka, Beckett, Blanchot, and Celan – the unstating of that which has been stated. Similarly, negative affixes in German and in English can follow rather than precede that which they negate – as, for instance, in the words *nameless* and *namenlos*. In this respect, rather like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, literary unwording faces backward as it moves into the future. That said,

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[22] In *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Robert Eaglestone considers the significance of the Holocaust for what he terms the "postmodern," within which he includes the philosophers Emmanuel Levinas as well as writers such as Anne Michaels and Jonathan Safran Foer. In *The Broken Voice: Reading Post-Holocaust Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Eaglestone turns to the analysis of literary works by writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Jonathan Littell, Imre Kértesz, and W. G. Sebald. Eaglestone's focus is thus not on those writers in the post–World War II period whose response to historical catastrophe takes the form of a literature of the unword, and it would be problematic to identify those writers as "postmodern."

[23] The concept of lateness as applied to literary movements, literary styles, and the careers of individual writers and artists has received increasing critical attention in recent years: see, in particular, Edward Said, *On Late Style* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006); Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles (eds.), *Late Style and Its Discontents: Essays in Art, Literature, and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and especially Ben Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

the forms of linguistic negativism to be found in the modern European literature of the unword vary not only from writer to writer, but also from language to language. For instance, whereas in English and German, negative affixes can both precede and follow the modifier – the *un-* affix preceding and the *-less* or *-los* affixes following – in French, negative affixes precede the modifier, as in *indicible* (unsayable), and it is often necessary to rely upon a preceding preposition, as in *sans nom* (nameless). The linguistic negativism that is characteristic of the literature of the unword is nonetheless one that remains belated because, like any form of negation, it necessarily comes after that which is negated. This is the case even when the act of unwording syntactically precedes that which is being unworded. And this process of unwording is in principle interminable. For not only does the language that is undone through forms of epanorthosis, parataxis, fragmentation, and the intensive deployment of negative affixes necessarily precede the work of undoing, but that work of undoing necessarily relies upon language and thus remains a linguistic event. That which is *unworded* in the literary work is thus always spectrally present in the way that the *unsaid* is not.

The literature of the unword is thus governed by the principles of impossibility, on the one hand, and necessity or obligation, on the other. The profound language skepticism out of which it emerges leads its practitioners to adopt the principle that the effective positive articulation of the experience of a catastrophic modernity is quite simply unachievable. The extremity of the experiences with which they concern themselves, and the ideological taint affecting existing languages, are such that these experiences beggar expression, and no amount of linguistic innovation will suffice to overcome the limitations of the language on which the writer has to rely. Hence, the writer's obligation becomes to pursue a linguistic *via negativa*. However, the forms of linguistic negativism that are deployed cannot, even at their most intensive, undo language altogether because that would abolish the literary work as such. What Blanchot refers to as the "disappearance of literature" is, in the literature of the unword, a process that is necessarily at once "incessant" and "interminable."[24] In the attempt to achieve the impossible – either to find the words for a language-beggaring experience, or to negate the word altogether – what emerges is the most accurate register of the negative experience of modernity. Thus,

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[24] Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 195, 213; *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1986), pp. 265, 290.

paradoxically, it is precisely in its failure to achieve it ends that the literature of the unword articulates the experience that evades the grasp of words.

It is this appreciation of impossibility, of the inevitability of failure, that distinguishes the literature of the unword from what Ihab Hassan describes as a modern "anti-literature" that would include among its practitioners the Marquis de Sade, Mallarmé, Kafka, Beckett, and Genet. For Hassan, this tradition of antiliterature is shaped above all by its commitment to a particular kind of silence: "the negative echo of language, autodestructive, demonic, nihilist."[25] Just as the literature of the unword is shaped by a principle of impossibility, if there is a nihilism in that literature then it is one that cannot easily be assimilated into either Enlightenment or counter-Enlightenment thinking.[26] For it would be a nihilism grounded in the idea that the positive is not only given, in Kafka's sense, but also precisely the bearer of an ideology that is itself nihilistic.

The idea of failure, and of an impossibility to which it is deemed necessary to commit literature, lies at the very heart of the political and ethical nature of this modern European literature of the unword. For all their many differences, both the Enlightenment and the counter-Enlightenment projects share a drive to mastery grounded in the idea of possibility; that is, the possibility of integrating or expelling various forms of alterity – political, cultural, ethnic, and religious. Both such an integration and such an expulsion are forms of negativity that fall within the realm of the possible, just as they fall under the aegis of universalism. While the attempted expulsion of alterity might at first glance seem to be antiuniversalist, it is ultimately no less universalist than an integrative approach to alterity because it takes that alterity not only to be all of a kind, but also to be at once identifiable and linguistically determinable.

In the literature of the unword, the forms of otherness with which it must contend can be neither included nor excluded and resist all attempts at positive linguistic determination. Those forms of otherness are, rather, that which challenges the power of the word, that which calls for a radical linguistic negativism that is also a form of political nominalism, troubled as it is to its very core by its failure to find, and indeed by what it takes to be the impossibility of finding, the words to capture the experience of calamity with which it concerns itself. It is to the nature of that experience that

[25] Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 248.
[26] On the concept of counter-Enlightenment, see in particular Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (London: Vintage, 2013), pp. 248–68.

Beckett directs us when, at the end of his (unbroadcast) 1946 radio text "The Capital of the Ruins," he refers to a vision of "humanity in ruins," this vision being one that would lead neither to despair nor to utopianism, but rather to "an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again."[27] By this idea of humanity in ruins is to be understood a humanity that is no longer master of itself or its world, a humanity that can no longer rest secure in its possession of reason and its ability to be self-determining, a humanity that finds itself obliged to reflect on its barbarism and its unknowing as much as on its civilization and its knowledge, and on its works of destruction as much as on its works of creation.[28] With its roots in late nineteenth-century language skepticism, intensified through the experience of historical catastrophe, the modern European literature of the unword thus becomes nothing less than an attempt to find the terms in which to begin to rethink our condition in dark times.

To chart the emergence of this literature of the unword, and to grasp both the nature and the functions of its unwording practices, it is first necessary, then, to consider its roots in the language skepticism manifested in both literary and philosophical discourse at the very moment when the concepts of modernity and modernism were being forged in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, if one is to appreciate the distinctiveness of this literary strain, it is also necessary not only to take account of the various manifestations of language skepticism and linguistic negativism to be found in the works of the European avant-garde and modernist revolutions of the word in the interwar years, but also to consider the ways in which language skepticism lay behind the most innovative attempts to achieve linguistic renewal. With that literary, philosophical, and historical terrain having been charted, one can turn to the closer analysis of some of the most radical incarnations of the literature of the unword in twentieth-century European literature, from Kafka to Beckett to Sebald and beyond. That analysis requires an appreciation of the ways in which linguistic negativism can operate in different languages, and the extent to which it can survive translation. Throughout, the question of the relation between historical experience and its inscription into the very form and style of the literary work remains paramount. For the visions of "misfortune" (Kafka), "humanity in ruins" (Beckett), "disaster"

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[27] Samuel Beckett, "The Capital of the Ruins," in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), pp. 275–78 (p. 278).

[28] On the ethical dimension to Beckett's conception of "humanity in ruins," see Lee Oser, *The Ethics of Modernism: Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf and Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 102–19.

(Blanchot), "that which happened" (Celan), and "calamity" (Sebald) that preoccupy the preeminent practitioners of this modern European literature of the unword, as it intensifies and proliferates in the course of the twentieth century, demand an uncompromising writing of the negative that opens onto nothing less than a negative universe where, for aesthetic, political, and ethical reasons, the word has unremittingly to be unworded.