

# Samuel Beckett and the Nobel *Catastrophe*

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Suzanne Beckett's shocked response to the news of her husband's Nobel Prize has gone down in history: it was, she declared, "a catastrophe." This paper follows Suzanne's lead and reads Beckett's 1982 play *Catastrophe* as Beckett's reaction to his receipt of the Nobel Prize. *Catastrophe* is not only Beckett's meditation on his painful experience of media exposure and institutional manipulation; it is also his caustic response to the Swedish Academy labelling him an "idealistic" writer of "compassion" and "inner purification."

La réponse stupéfaite de Suzanne Beckett à la nouvelle du Prix Nobel de son mari est restée dans les annales : elle a déclaré que c'était une "catastrophe." Cet article suit l'exemple de Suzanne et interprète la pièce *Catastrophe* (1982) comme la réaction du dramaturge à son Prix Nobel. *Catastrophe* est une méditation de Beckett sur son expérience douloureuse d'une exposition aux médias et à la manipulation institutionnelle. Elle est aussi sa réponse caustique au fait que l'Académie Suédois l'a qualifié d'un écrivain "idéaliste" de "la compassion" et "la purification intérieure."

Nobel Prize – catastrophe – idealism – ideal – literature.

In October 1969, the Swedish Academy announced that Samuel Beckett was to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. A few hours after the official statement, the *Irish Times* received a call for help from the literary editor of a leading Norwegian newspaper attempting to report on the event. "Beckett is in Tunisia," the desperate editor said. "He cannot be contacted, and no-one here in Oslo knows anything about him" (qtd. in Reid 63). For several days, the world's media hunted Beckett and Suzanne, who had gone underground for the second time in their lives following Jérôme Lindon's apologetic telegram: "Chers Sam et Suzanne, Malgré tout ils t'ont donné le Prix Nobel – Je vous conseille de vous cacher. Je vous embrasse." (Dear Sam and Suzanne. In spite of everything they have given you the Nobel Prize – I advise you to go into hiding. With affection; qtd. in Knowlson, 570).<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Beckett's shocked response to the news of her husband's Nobel Prize has subsequently gone down in history: it was, she declared, "a catastrophe" (qtd. in Knowlson, 570).

This paper follows Suzanne's lead and reads Beckett's 1982 play *Catastrophe* as Beckett's response to his receipt of the Nobel Prize, and "its intrinsic celebrificatory power" (Braun, 321). The play reworks Beckett's own distress following the media intrusion into his life as a result of the Nobel announcement, and the Nobel Institution's well-meaning but wrong-headed handling of Beckett and his own work. *Catastrophe* also comprises Beckett's response to the manner in which he found himself categorised by the Nobel committee as an idealistic writer of "fellow-feeling, charity" and "elevation" (Gierow, 87). *Catastrophe*, then, is not only Beckett's meditation on his painful experience of media exposure and institutional manipulation; it is also his caustic response to being labelled an 'idealistic' writer.

## The Nobel Prize for Literature

A brief review of the Nobel Prize for Literature and its stated aims is helpful in contextualising Beckett's 1969 experience. On his death in 1896, the inventor of dynamite Alfred Nobel dedicated his estate to the establishment of the Nobel Prizes. Nobel stipulated that the interest from the fortune he left behind should be "annually distributed in the form of prizes to those who, during the preceding

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<sup>1</sup> All English translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind” (Nobel, v). The literary prize was to go specifically to “the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an ideal tendency” (Nobel, v). Alice Hall has observed the “shifting understandings of Nobel’s will and wider notions of the ‘ideal’” (148) in the Nobel institution’s subsequent workings. After Nobel’s death, a close friend of his was asked what the word “ideal” had meant to the late man; the friend responded that Nobel “was an anarchist: by idealistic he meant that which adopts a polemical or critical attitude to Religion, Royalty, Marriage, Social Order generally” (qtd. in Espmark 1991, 4). Subsequent Nobel committees, however, have reinterpreted Alfred Nobel’s apparent values, reading ‘ideal’ in its ethical and religious sense. Carl David af Wirsén, first chair of the Nobel Committee, stated that he interpreted Nobel’s guidelines as indicating that the laureate’s works ought to be “of a sound and lofty idealism,” containing “a true nobility not simply of presentation but conception and philosophy of life” (qtd. in Espmark 1991, 9). Nobel committee member Kjell Espmark testifies that, to past Nobel Committees, “[o]f primary importance was an idealistic view of the nature of reality, particularly the Christian conception of reality [...] A critical or negative attitude toward Christianity was a disqualification [...] [and] an agnostic outlook could also cause difficulties” (1991, 12-13). Consequently, the Nobel Prize for Literature was traditionally awarded to a writer whose work cultivated and affirmed a very specific set of primarily conservative values which could be read by the Nobel Committee as representing and encouraging a consequently high ethical standard of behaviour that demonstrates a faith in human ideals – that is, as Toril Moi explains the application of idealism to art and literature, “an aesthetic norm based on the belief that the task of art [...] is to uplift us, to point the way to the ideal” (271). Thus we can understand Ezra Pound’s scorn when asked by Wyndham Lewis in the 1920s if Pound thought he might ever win the award: “No, the Nobel Prize is for idealists” (qtd. in Pratt, 226).<sup>2</sup>

The first Nobel committee’s emphasis on the idealistic nature of their preferred candidates has been followed so rigorously by subsequent Nobel committees that in 1991 the New Yorker published ironic advice on how to “write to win”: “Write epic, write cosmic; above all, write long, write upbeat” (Gopnik, 31). Long, upbeat, idealistic work: nothing seems to suggest Samuel Beckett as an obvious candidate for such an award, particularly given that in the three years before his 1969 receipt of the Nobel Prize he had produced *Eh Joe*, *Come and Go*, *Texts for Nothing* and *Breath* – certainly nothing particularly epic or idealistic. Marcel Achard’s disgust at the Nobel Committee’s rewarding what he took to be Beckett’s offensively dispiriting work was widely reported in the contemporary press:

[J]’étais révolté : ma carrière a été dévouée à cette idée que la vie valait la peine d’être vécue, que les gens n’étaient jamais aussi mauvais qu’ils n’en avaient l’air, que le contact humain était possible, que la haine était une niaiserie et que l’amour seul menait le monde. Etaient-ce là des raisons pour apprécier la tragédie du désespoir, les horizons bouchés, les femmes-troncs et les habitants de poubelles de Samuel Beckett ?

I was revolted: my career has been dedicated to the idea that life is worth living, that people aren’t as awful as they seem, that hatred is foolishness and that only love runs the world. Are these reasons to appreciate Beckett’s despairing tragedies, his overcast horizons, his female torsos and his dustbin-dwellers?

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Nevertheless, the 1969 Nobel committee strove to justify their choice following their understanding of Nobel’s criteria. Beckett’s work, they decreed, “draws the grandeur of man from his very destitution” (qtd. in Smith, 5). Dr. Karl-Ragnar Gierow’s speech at the prize ceremony in December 1969 continued this theme, arguing that Beckett’s work “houses a love of mankind that grows in understanding [...] to discover that compassion has no bounds”. Although he acknowledged the “degradation” of the post-war being in Beckett’s work, the Secretary of the Swedish Academy argued to his audience that from such unhappiness comes “a brighter image [...] This is the source of inner

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<sup>2</sup> When Pound came under discussion in the Swedish Academy as a potential Nobel Laureate, his candidacy was dismissed on the basis on his anti-semitic involvement in World War II, which Academy member Dag Hammarskjöld declared excluded Pound from “a prize that is after all intended to lay weight on the idealistic tendency of the recipient’s efforts” (qtd. in Espmark 2001, 140-41).

purification, the life-giving strength in spite of everything that springs from Beckett's black pessimism" (Gierow, 87). Russell Smith strikes a chord when he derides the Nobel Committee's reading of Beckett's work as "seem[ing] almost comically inadequate now [...] due to its cheerful disregard for the caustic irony to which such platitudes are subjected in Beckett's work" (5). That the Nobel Committee's summary has nevertheless had its influence is demonstrated, however, by the pervasive strain of Beckett scholarship – particularly rife during the early 1970s – that determinedly reads an ultimately uplifting confirmation of the human being's value in Beckett's texts. Elaine Scarry would, with typical prescience, summarise this critical strain in 1971, observing:

[M]any persons are currently participating in one of two separate, anonymously sponsored underground contests. The one offers a prize, a bicycle, to that Beckett critic [...] whose essay promises to provoke the deepest feeling of shame and self-doubt in any playgoer indulging in post-performance illusions of well-being. The second and only slightly less popular contest offers its prize, also a bicycle, to that critic [...] whose essay presents the most ingenious, if sophisticated, demonstration of Beckett's submerged but omnipresent optimism.

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Scarry does not explicitly mention Beckett's recent Nobel win, but she ends her fanciful yet fitting account of the state of Beckett criticism with a seeming contextualising allusion: "While such contests are not devoid of fascination, the reader with a healthy, Beckettian turn of mind may be suspicious of any phenomenon premised on the notion of winning" (278).

While the value of ethical idealism is today still more sceptically treated in literary criticism, and the Nobel Prize for Literature has almost entirely ceased to reward 'idealism' in any explicit sense – as testified by the choice of such recipients as Harold Pinter in 2005 and J. M. Coetzee in 2003 – it is also worth noting that even by 1969 a general pessimism had developed around the Nobel Prize. Rather than a cynical view of ethical idealism, such pessimism focused on the sense of the Nobel Prize as signalling the end – a triumphant end, but an end nevertheless – of a writer's career. Despite Alfred Nobel's stipulation that the Nobel Prizes be awarded based on work produced within the preceding year, the committee routinely appeared to favour older writers more conceivably being rewarded for their completed life's body of work: the 72-year-old William Golding, the 75-year-old Harold Pinter, the 78-year-old André Gide. Indeed, past Nobel member Jeffrey Meyers went so far as to say that the committee "prefers to give the award to moribund writers [...] It's clearly advantageous to have a terminal illness" (215). T. S. Eliot, following his own receipt of the award at the age of sixty, lamented, "The Nobel is a ticket to one's own funeral. No one has ever done anything after he got it" (qtd. in Simpson, 173). Ernest Hemingway followed him in 1954 at the age of fifty-five, complaining "You finally scramble ashore and the bastards hit you over the head with a lifebelt" (qtd. in Hitchens, 1066). Richard Kostelanetz likewise pointed out, "More winners than not have failed to do major work after receiving the prize. [...] It's a distraction, albeit a classy one" (32), and James Knowlson reports that Beckett himself fell into a creative impasse after 1969, for which he blamed the Nobel Prize (579).

### **The Nobel *Catastrophe***

By offering a reading of the play that draws attention to the play's links with Beckett's Nobel Prize, I do not intend to disregard other readings that focus on Václav Havel's influence on the play and its dissident politics, or Beckett's self-critical vision of his own theatrical practice as playwright and director.<sup>3</sup> Rather, my own reading complements and extends these other perspectives. Following Matthijs Engelberts's warning that careful attention to *Catastrophe*'s dynamics "rend très problématique une interprétation univoque de la pièce" (makes any single interpretation of the play very problematic; 188), this article contends that such readings, while valuable, risk focusing so closely on either political ideology or aesthetics that the other perspective is occluded from

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<sup>3</sup> For more detailed discussion of these readings, see Paul Stewart 2016, Paul Sheehan 2009, Jim Hansen 2008, and Angela Moorjani 2005.

consideration. As H. Porter Abbott observes, “response to *Catastrophe* has been blurred by the continual debate as to whether its focus in political or aesthetic” whereas in fact “the aesthetic and the political are two faces of a single meaning” (87). Here, examining the play with the Nobel Prize and “the explicit manner in which it facilitates the simultaneous production and consumption of celebrity” (Braun, 321) in mind allows us to hold both political ideology and aesthetics in view simultaneously. Broadly speaking, politics and artistic practice are inextricably entwined within the Nobel industry, which offers “an economics of cultural prestige” while consequently “involv[ing] both the awarders and recipients in a highly ritualized theater of gestures and countergestures” (English, 5). More specifically, Beckett’s confrontation with the Nobel industry and its repercussions combined both the politics of the institution and an intense aesthetic scrutiny of his written work. As Andrew Gibson observes, *Catastrophe* “does not think [its] logic solely or even principally in one set of concrete terms” (237).

A partial forerunner in this linking of the political and the aesthetic in *Catastrophe* is Stephen Dilks’s discussion, who also links the play and the Nobel Prize by way of Suzanne’s exclamation. Beyond this initial congruence, however, Dilks’s and my readings of the play differ markedly. Dilks examines *Catastrophe* as Beckett’s dramatisation of his own image-construction in the literary marketplace, reading primarily the Director rather than the Protagonist as Beckett’s self-portrait (318-319), and the play as the confession of a master manipulator of publicity rather than one manipulated by press and the Nobel institution, “exposing [...] the process of self-fashioning and self-representation, [...] the process designed to establish and perpetuate his career as a professional writer” (6). I see *Catastrophe* rather as revealing Beckett’s sense of unwanted exposure following his Nobel award, his unhappy feelings of manipulation by press and the Nobel industry, and a final resistance to this forcible direction from others.

*Catastrophe* performs bodily exposure in a manner that mimics Beckett’s own experience following the announcement of his Nobel laureateship. James Knowlson has testified many times to Beckett’s aversion to intrusion on his privacy, and Jérôme Lindon, attempting to shield his publicity-shy client, likewise told the Nobel press, “[c]haque fois qu’un importun parvient jusqu’à l’écrivain, celui-ci est malade pour une semaine” (Every time someone manages to importune Beckett in person, he is ill for a week; qtd. in Zegel 1969, 8). Even the contemporary media of 1969 recognised Beckett’s distaste for their incursions. John Montague of *Magazine Littéraire* wrote of the Nobel announcement that Beckett “perd du même coup la seule chose qui lui soit chère: sa solitude [...] l’abri dans lequel il avait réussi à s’isoler” (lost in one moment the only thing dear to him: his solitude [...] the shelter in which he had managed to isolate himself; 9). Despite this recognition, the media hounded Beckett, scouring Tunisia for him in the days following the Nobel announcement, camping out in every major hotel in the country until he was located, and then descending en masse on the Hotel Riadh and forcing the playwright to hide upstairs in his rented room for several days. Comparably, in *Catastrophe*, the Protagonist is raised – on a plinth, rather than in an upstairs bedroom – for maximum, immobilised exposure to the audience’s gaze, mirroring Beckett’s own vulnerability to publicity, comment and critique following the Nobel Prize. “Ce corps est disséqué, autopsié presque,” Hélène Lecossois observes, “réduit à un corps muet, presque entièrement immobile, réifié” (This body is dissected, practically autopsied [...] reduced to a mute body, almost entirely immobile, reified; 263). The Protagonist’s flesh is progressively exposed – first feet, then hands, then head, neck, shins, knees – as the spectacularisation of his body becomes more crude, more invasive. Similarly, after Beckett had remained in hiding for several days, Jérôme Lindon told the press that the playwright would appear for one photo shoot, on the condition that he be allowed to remain silent. Even after this concession had been made, a Swedish team of journalists arrived a few days later, demanding a film image of Beckett, and were eventually placated only with a colour photograph of the playwright – deciding, apparently, that this was sufficient progress on the monochrome photographs taken in the first photoshoot. Both bodies, Beckett’s and the Protagonists, find themselves “progressively exposed and dissected,” as Anna McMullan notes of *Catastrophe* (1993, 29).

I refer deliberately above to a dissection of Beckett’s *body* in alignment with the Protagonist’s body, Beckett’s physical body as well as his body of work. Jean-Pierre Faye wrote in the *Magazine Littéraire* in December 1969 of his delight in seeing “la tête extraordinaire de Beckett, en photo, à la première page des journaux” (a photograph of Beckett’s extraordinary head on the front page of the

newspapers) following the Nobel announcement (20), Alec Reid described in “The Reluctant Prizeman” in November 1969, “This lithe yet craggy man with the head of a Maths or Physics professor set on the legs and torso of a quarter mile runner” (68), and Guy Dumur included his announcement of Beckett’s Nobel Prize in *Le Nouvel Observateur* a description of “le beau visage de Samuel Beckett” (Samuel Beckett’s handsome face; “La Presse en parle” 1969, 6). We might recall here Braun’s observation that Nobel laureates must accustom themselves to “allowing their face to front a certain conception of literature” (324). Beckett’s body, rather than his body of work, is bizarrely made the subject of a number of media discussions in the aftermath of his Nobel Prize, just as the Protagonist’s body is made the subject of the Director’s theatrical vision, its flesh whitened, denaturalized, and treated as a material to be altered at will. The drafts of the French-language *Catastrophe* reveal that at one point Beckett changed the line “Ça manque de nudité” (1986, 78), translated in the English text as “Could do with more nudity” (2006, 460), to “Il manque de la chair” (UoR MS 2547/1) (It needs more flesh), turning a line already evocative of a certain distasteful exploitation into a menacing echo of the proverbial ‘pound of flesh’ that the media were determined to have from Beckett, both literally and figuratively, following his award. Both bodies, the Protagonist’s and Beckett’s, are “transformed into a sign, into material to be manipulated, disciplined, shaped” (McMullan 1993, 28), the former by the Director and the latter by the media frenzy of 1969.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the media’s intrusive hounding, *Catastrophe* also plays out Beckett’s experience of institutional manipulation via the Nobel mechanisms, if we focus on the metaphorical rather than literal overtones of the play’s events. Meyers has complained of what he claims is the fiercely “despotic” workings of the Nobel committee on even its own members (216), and the Director’s command to his Assistant “Step on it, I have a caucus” (2006, 458) bespeaks the shadowy outline of a larger organisation lurking behind the scenes. Similarly, the Director’s repeated silencing of his Assistant echoes Richard Kostelanetz’s recollection from his time on the committee that “no reservations concerning the majority’s opinion may be expressed” (4). Beckett was pulled into this polite but exigent institutional manipulation himself. The Protagonist is positioned on what the Assistant calls his “pedestal” (2006, 459); the Nobel institution raised Beckett onto a similarly constrictive pedestal by conferring the laureateship upon him. The Director’s subsequent manipulation of the Protagonist’s body into a formal shape befitting his own theatrical vision, what Abbott calls “the aesthetic will that seeks to dominate the human through formal representation” (87), mimics not only the manipulation of Beckett’s own physical body, but also the Nobel institution’s arrogation and repackaging of his writing as uplifting idealism. The “craze for explicitation” (2006, 459) against which the Director rails – momentarily taking on a view more in sympathy with Beckett’s own – ironically echoes the Nobel committee’s explaining and pigeon-holing of Beckett’s work according to their own criteria, and the media’s subsequent attempts to concisely “explicitate” Beckett’s plays and novels for a mass audience. That this appropriation was well-intended as a celebration of Beckett’s work rendered it no less painful to the reclusive playwright; the Protagonist’s crippled hands, caused by Beckett’s own Dupuytren’s disease in the French text – which, significantly, Deirdre Bair records him as contracting directly following the announcement of his Nobel prize (609) – adds a reminder of Beckett’s own personal suffering to the play, that hints at what Knowlson calls this “beleaguered” figure “whose privacy is being progressively invaded” (679).

The Protagonist’s silence and immobility also echo the aftermath of Beckett’s Nobel laureateship. Hubert Le Campion, one of the photographers at the initial photoshoot in the Hotel Riadh, recalls that, as Lindon has warned, Beckett indeed “sat in silence during the picture-taking” (UoR MS3856; see also Bair 609). Beckett refused all subsequent requests for interviews, and his silence is reflected in the Director’s certainty that his Protagonist “won’t utter [...] Not a squeak” (2006, 459). While the refusal of interviews may seem on one hand to form a spirited refusal on Beckett’s part to acquiesce to institutional demands, the Protagonist’s silence suggests a painful compliance to the mechanism within which he finds himself. Angela Moorjani articulates a widespread consensus when she interprets P’s silence as his determination to “résiste jusqu’au bout”

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<sup>4</sup> This article is not focused on the much-discussed issue of the predominance of white Western authors who have traditionally been the recipients of the Nobel Prize, but the Director’s repeated command “Needs whitening” (459) and the Assistant’s commitment to “Whiten all flesh” (460) offers a delicious if tenuous connection to the ‘whitewashed’ Nobel laureates.

the Director's tyranny (resist right up to the very end; 2008, 30), but Engelberts's scepticism as to how far P's behaviour constitutes "un acte d'insoumission univoque" (an unequivocal act of rebellion; 181) offers a far less optimistic reading. Following Jean-Paul Sartre's rejection of the Nobel Prize for Literature five years previously in 1964, the media dedicated columns of print to discussing whether or not Beckett would accept the award, and if so, whether he would give the traditional acceptance speech at his award ceremony in Stockholm. Lindon reported that, for all Beckett's reluctance to be ensnared in the Nobel industry, he felt himself obliged to accept the award for fear of causing unnecessary furore: "C'est un homme très courtois et je ne le vois pas faisant un éclat et refusant le prix à grand fracas" (He's a very polite man, and I can't see him making a big fuss and uproar by refusing the prize; qtd. in Zegel, 8). Beckett found himself constrained to silent acceptance of his fate at the hands of the Nobel institution, and in light of this context the Protagonist's apparently chosen silence takes on a less rebellious, more pessimistic interpretation: no "gag" (2006, 459) is necessary because both men find themselves already gagged by circumstance. The Protagonist may not "clench his fists" (2006, 458) on the Director's stage; Beckett, similarly, could make no move and speak no word according to his own desires. He can only "submit, inert" (2006, 458), to the demands made upon him by an institution greater than himself.

### A Catastrophic Ending

Any interpretation of *Catastrophe* must be conditioned by the play's ending, in which the Protagonist lifts his head to gaze upon the audience, silencing the canned applause. Notably, the earliest French-language drafts of *Catastrophe* do not end thus: rather, they close with simply applause and then silence, with no movement from the Protagonist (UoR MS2457/1 and UoR MS2457/2). It is only in the third known draft that Beckett pencils "P relève la tête, fixe la salle. Les a. faiblissent, s'arrêtent" (P. raises his head, stares at the audience. The a[ppause] falters, stops) between the typewritten "Lointain tonnerre d'acclamations" and "Silence" (Distant thunder of applause; Silence) (UoR MS 2456/1).

On the most obvious level, we can read the Protagonist's silencing of the recorded applause as a rejection of the meaningless and impersonal accolades represented by the more automatic media praise following Beckett's Nobel laureateship. There is also space, however, to read here a more Nobel-oriented self-criticism on Beckett's part than past readings of *Catastrophe* as Beckett's critique of his own artistic practice have offered. The Protagonist looks to, *responds* to, the applause; although his look silences it, there is an initial moment of acknowledgement in his lifting his head, a turning to popular acclaim that Beckett perhaps feared in himself. Where Dilks decries "the myth that has placed Beckett in a hermetically-sealed box on a commercial-free pedestal" (4) in favour of his own image of a writer "with an obsessive interest in the public reception of his work" (3), *Catastrophe* indicates a man terrified of the public pedestal, ashamed of and resisting his own reluctant interest in his work's public acclaim, the seemingly inevitable risk of becoming "complicit with the public fetishisation of intellectual endeavour" (327). Where most critics who read elements of self-portrayal in the play have focused on Beckett's self-parodying in the figure of the Director, the Protagonist in this respect can also be read as in part a gesture of self-criticism on Beckett's part.<sup>5</sup> For this intensely private artist, to desire on any level the approbation on the Nobel Prize seems its own catastrophe, as would be the subsequent arranging of the work to accommodate what looked best upon the Nobel pedestal, be that via the Nobel committee's interpretation or Beckett's own consequent self-consciousness. The only gradual scripting of the Protagonist's response to applause over the course of the play's early drafts would then signal Beckett's own reluctant recognition and confession of his paralysing and strongly resisted inclinations towards popular acclaim. Crucially, however, Beckett's receipt and acceptance of the Nobel Prize was not to herald the descent into institutionalised inertia that haunted Golding, Eliot and Hemingway. The Protagonist's final gestures of agency – and indeed the writing of *Catastrophe* itself subsequent to Beckett's receipt of the Nobel – embody that achievement. Knowlson's testimony of Beckett's own explanation of *Catastrophe*'s ending testifies to Beckett's own understanding of the significance of *Catastrophe*'s final moments:

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Anna McMullan 1993, 31, and 1994, 200-1, and Rosemary Pountney 1988, 226.

It is perhaps worth passing on evidence from my own discussions with the author concerning Beckett's own view of the protagonist's final raising of his head. Discussing reviews of Alan Schneider's production that came to Britain in 1984, he objected that in referring to what one might describe as the "finale" someone had claimed that it was "ambiguous." "There's no ambiguity there at all," he commented. 'He's saying, you bastards, you haven't finished me yet!'

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Nevertheless, the Nobel committee's insistence on Beckett's idealism as justification for his receipt of the Prize complicates a reading of the end of *Catastrophe* as a simple – if hard-won – rejection of the Nobel system. For the Protagonist's triumphant reassertion of his personal agency against the forces of despotic institutionalism is also a potent example of precisely the idealism with which the Nobel committee labelled Beckett. *Catastrophe* stands apart from Beckett's other dramatic work as offering an atypically triumphant ending, a determined performance of "man's irreducible spirit, the triumph of the individual's will," as Rosette Lamont puts it (3). Dougald McMillan uses the moment to argue for a notably Nobel-appropriate idealistic reading: "In this gesture there is the implication that human reality can be freed from the tyranny of art [...] [if granted] a means of presentation even more direct and compassionate than [Beckett] has already developed" (112). (Exactly what McMillan means by "human reality" he does not say, but it seems contextually bound to precisely the "nobility" of man, "an idealistic view of the nature of reality" cited above by Wirsén and Espmark respectively.) More perceptively, Julian Murphet has restrained himself simply to observing that "[t]he gesture of raising a head at the end of *Catastrophe* is atypical and relatively romantic by Beckett's standards" (134). Although Murphet does not propose a reason for this gesture of apparent idealism, the anomaly is usually explained with reference to *Catastrophe*'s link to Václav Havel: it would be perverse to offer a play in support of the Czechoslovakian's plight that did not propose some sense of hopeful resistance. Our focus on *Catastrophe*'s links with the Nobel Prize, however, invites further probing of this atypically hopeful ending. With this play, Beckett rejects the Nobel Prize manipulation of himself and his work, and yet apparently does so while embodying the very idealism of which he stood accused by the 1969 Nobel committee.

Significantly, however, *Catastrophe*'s idealism is in fact not quite the *very* idealism that the Nobel Committee vaunted. *Catastrophe*, I suggest, embodies Beckett's rejection of the Nobel Committee's conception and glossing of his work, and offers in its place a return to Alfred Nobel's original conception of a work "of an ideal tendency."<sup>6</sup> That is, *Catastrophe*'s idealism is neither "lofty," nor "noble," nor explicitly "Christian," but rather reflects Alfred Nobel's original vaunting of a "critical attitude to Religion, Royalty, Marriage, Social Order": towards, that is, symbols of authority and social regulation. Anthony Uhlmann notes of *Catastrophe* that it denies "assent to an idea linked to a greater social body" (63) – the Nobel Committee, we would specifically offer here – and demonstrates instead, along with *Rough for Theatre II*, the act to "overcome or cut off processes of interpretation which are in train", with both the Protagonist and C respectively "cutting across interpretations of their states of being which are being developed by the bureaucrats" (64). "If one assents to these interpretations and the processes that fix them in place one becomes part of the machine that produces them," Uhlmann continues of *Catastrophe* (66), not explicitly invoking Beckett's Nobel Prize but providing an oddly apt accidental gloss of Beckett's response to it. Likewise, the Director's "imposition of a singular logic," Gibson reminds us, "is one of specification, the assignment of a world, the capture of organization of a multiple being" (237), and it is precisely this imposition of a singular interpretation that *Catastrophe* defeats. Pundits in 1969 had noted the irony of Beckett, "un adversaire ironique des hiérarchies, des rites officiels, de la société trop établie" (ironically an opponent of hierarchies, official rituals, and any too-firmly-established society;

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Alfred Nobel seems to share more common ground with Beckett than might be initially supposed. Alec Reid records Nobel's description of himself as "that half-being Alfred Nobel, whom a philanthropic physician should have strangled at birth as he came howling into the world," his own dislike of public scrutiny and being photographed, his preference for writing prose and poetry in a language that was not his mother tongue, and his own experience as a voluntary exile, a self-described "European tramp" (69).

Marissel, 1), being awarded such a carefully regulated and officially hierarchised prize; *Catastrophe* resists this regulated official order. Not “upbeat,” but determined, not “Christian,” but resistant: *Catastrophe* rejects what Richard Jewell calls the Nobel Committee’s “conservative viewpoint of what great literature should be” (104) and returns to Alfred Nobel’s original admiration for of socially resistant literature as his ‘ideal’ art.

## Conclusion

To finish, then, let us remember that the Greek root of the word catastrophe, *katastrephein* (from *kata*, ‘down’ and *strephein*, ‘turn’) encompasses the senses of ‘to turn down’ and ‘to come to an end.’ These, along with the sixteenth-century meaning ‘reversal of what is expected’ and the related seventeenth-century meaning ‘a subversion of the order of things’ are as relevant to an interpretation of Beckett’s play as is the modern definition of ‘sudden disaster’ (“catastrophe, n.” *OED*). Beckett did not ‘turn down’ the Nobel Prize in the explicit sense that Sartre did, but the play *Catastrophe* represents, and indeed enacts, his refusal to ‘come to an end’ of his career. Instead, the ‘reversal of what is expected’ from the average Nobel laureate by doom-mongers such as Eliot, Hemmingway and Kostelanetz, and which Beckett himself seemed to fear: a continued, and distinctly non-sentimentalised, career. As Terry Eagleton notes, Beckett’s “farce and bathos may spell the ruin of hope, but they also undercut the terrorism of noble ideals” (65). A ‘sudden disaster’ the Nobel Prize may have initially been for Beckett, but *Catastrophe* transmutes that disaster into a powerfully resistant work that reworks the narrow boundaries of the Nobel Committee’s idea of ‘fine art’ into a more expansive, more modern version of Alfred Nobel’s own resistance to social regulation.

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### **Indexical Entries**

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The Nobel Prize Committee  
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3. Keywords  
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