



## DENARRATION AND NARRATIVE PERSISTENCE IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S PROSE AND DRAMA

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines Samuel Beckett's prose and drama through the concept of denarration, understood as a narrational practice that undermines the world it appears to construct. Drawing on Brian Richardson's theorization of denarration and situating Beckett's work within a broader modernist and postmodernist context, the article argues that Beckett's dismantling of narrative does not signal the end of storytelling but rather exposes the minimal and performative conditions under which narrative can persist. This study shows how voice, silence, repetition, and interruption become the basic materials out of which narrative continues to emerge through a close reading of Beckett's fiction and drama together, ranging from the early novels and poetry, such as *The Trilogy*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*, to the late prose works. The article reconceptualizes denarration not as narrative negation, but as a sustained poetic strategy that enables narrative persistence beyond plot, character, and verisimilitude.

**Keywords:** Samuel Beckett; denarration; narratology; modernist prose; theatrical performance

### **1. Introduction**

We are, as Vladimir Nabokov (1989) observed, absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs containing immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with living people, speaking, weeping, laughing. What we tend to overlook, Nabokov suggests, is not simply what we read, but the fact that it is readable at all, that narrative worlds, however fragile or artificial, can still be constructed and inhabited through language. This basic condition of readability underwrites any ontology of narrative, even as modernist and postmodernist writing persistently strains, complicates, or undermines it.

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Few writers interrogate this condition as relentlessly as Samuel Beckett. Across his prose and drama, Beckett repeatedly stages the desire to tell stories alongside the failure, exhaustion, or negation of storytelling itself. In many of the later works, *Embers*, *Rockaby*, *Company*, *Worstward Ho*, the act of narration appears less as a vehicle for story than as an object of scrutiny: a compulsion that persists even when narrative coherence, character stability, and plot progression have largely dissolved. Beckett's narrators often seem far more invested in testing the possibility of continuing to narrate than in telling any particular story to completion. The result is a body of work that persistently exposes, dismantles, and reconfigures the minimal conditions under which narrative can still occur.

This essay approaches Beckett's prose and drama through the lens of denarration, a term Brian Richardson defines as a form of narration that "*undermines the world it purports to depict.*" Denarration operates through negation, contradiction, erasure, and revision, destabilizing the reader's sense of a coherent diegetic world even as it paradoxically brings narrative processes themselves into sharper relief. In Beckett, denarration is not merely a late stylistic development or a symptom of narrative exhaustion; rather, it is a sustained poetics that runs from the early fiction and poetry through the novels, the plays, and the late minimalist texts.

Drawing on Beckett's strong inter- and intratextual continuity, this essay traces a series of recurring narrative situations—isolated narrating consciousnesses, attenuated journeys, doubled or multiplied figures, and voices speaking from indeterminate spaces—that persist even as traditional narrative structures are progressively dismantled. From the relatively coherent narrative worlds of Murphy and Watt, through the destabilized subjectivities of *The Trilogy*, and into the stripped-down theatrical and late prose works, Beckett repeatedly pares narrative back to what might be called its performative core: voice, silence, bodily presence, and the compulsion to go on. Methodologically, the article combines narratological theory with close textual analysis across Beckett's prose and drama, tracing denarration as a sustained practice rather than a period-specific or genre-bound phenomenon.

By reading Beckett's prose and drama together, this essay argues that denarration does not simply erase narrative but instead clears a space in which narrative can persist in altered, minimal, and performative forms. The collapse of plot, character, and verisimilitude in Beckett's work does not signal the end of narrative so much as its relocation—from external worlds and events to the act of narration itself, from story to performance, from representation to iteration. In this sense, Beckett's denarrated texts do not foreclose narrative possibility; they expose the fragile mechanisms by which narrative continues to emerge, even—or especially—when there seems to be "*nothing to be done.*" While Beckett's narrative minimalism has been widely discussed, the specific narrational mechanisms by which narrative persists under conditions of negation remain under-theorized. By applying Brian Richardson's concept of denarration across Beckett's prose and drama, this article offers a unified account of how narrative survives not through representation but through performative acts of narration.

## 2. Denarration and the Beckettian Narrative Situation

Given the strong inter- and intratextual continuity of Beckett's fiction and plays, it is possible to identify a limited set of recurring narrative situations that structure his explorations of narrative itself. These include the isolated male consciousness, caught between the desire to inhabit and to escape a diegetic frame; the absent, imagined, or remembered female figure, often mother or lover; the attenuated journey across an increasingly abstracted landscape; and the proliferation, doubling, or false coupling of characters—Mercier and Camier, A and B, Didi and Gogo, Malone and Moran, Winnie and Mrs Rooney, Henry and Ada. Such figures and situations recur insistently across Beckett's oeuvre, even as imagery, plot, and narrative coherence are progressively pared away.

What persists, despite this process of reduction, is not a stable narrative world but the situation of narration itself. As Beckett's narrators repeatedly demonstrate, the drive and desire to tell stories often play as important a role as whatever story is being, or not being, told. The diegetic frame is frequently revealed as something actively "*fabled*" by the narrating consciousness, as in *Company*, where the narrator explicitly reflects on the act of constructing the very scene in which he finds himself (Beckett 2009, 42). This metafictional exposure of narrative construction lies at the heart of Beckett's denarrative practice.

Brian Richardson defines denarration as a mode of narration that "*undermines the world it purports to depict*" (Richardson 2001, 171). In this article, denarration is understood not as an occasional metafictional gesture but as a persistent narrational logic that structures Beckett's fictional and dramatic worlds. In Beckett, this undermining frequently occurs through negation, contradiction, or retrospective revision. A paradigmatic example appears in the second part of *Molloy*, when Moran admits, almost casually, that "*it was not raining,*" despite his earlier insistence that it was (Beckett 2010, 224). The effect of this reversal is not merely to cast doubt on a particular detail but to destabilize the authority of narration itself. The narrative world is shown to exist only provisionally, sustained by linguistic assertion and just as easily revoked.

Denarration thus first manifests at the level of language. A series of statements is sufficient to construct a rainy night, a journey, or even a character such as "Moran" or "Molloy," but these constructions remain vulnerable to erasure from within. As Richardson observes, in denarrative texts we do not simply witness "*a fluctuating narrator alter descriptions of a stable world*"; rather, "*we will see the world being created and recreated anew*" (170). In Beckett's work, narration becomes a reversible act, one that exposes the fragility of narrative ontology while simultaneously making visible the minimal conditions under which narrative can still be said to occur.

This dynamic helps explain why Beckett's characteristic narrative situations persist even as their conventional novelistic supports disappear. The isolated consciousness, the journey that leads nowhere, the paired figures who fail to cohere into stable relationships—all remain not because they belong to a continuous fictional universe, but because they constitute repeatable narrative gestures. Denarration, in this

sense, does not simply dismantle Beckett's narrative worlds; it reveals them as provisional performances, sustained only for as long as the act of narration continues. This narrational instability is not merely thematic but structural, offering a model for understanding how narrative can function without relying on coherence, continuity, or stable referentiality.

### 3. From Novelistic World to Narrative Aporia

In Beckett's early fiction, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *Murphy*, and even *Mercier and Camier*, characters still inhabit recognizable narrative worlds, however unstable or ironic these worlds may be. Settings remain legible, characters interact with one another in discernible social and spatial contexts, and events unfold according to a logic that, while often mocked or undermined, remains fundamentally novelistic. The opening of *Murphy*, "*The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new*", already gestures toward narrative exhaustion and existential stasis, yet the novel nonetheless sustains a coherent diegetic frame in which characters move, converse, and pursue goals, however futile these may appear (Beckett 1994, 1).

This tension between narrative coherence and narrative skepticism becomes increasingly pronounced in works such as *Mercier and Camier*, where action itself becomes the object of ridicule. As the narrator meticulously corrects the sequence of the protagonists' arrivals—insisting that *Mercier*, not *Camier*, was in fact the first to arrive—the text exposes the artificiality of narrative sequencing while still operating within it (Beckett 2011, 8–9). The inclusion of a pseudo-scientific chart detailing arrival and departure times, followed by the dismissive remark "*What stink of artifice*," performs a form of denarration from within: narrative structure is both enacted and mocked simultaneously.

A similar strategy governs *Watt*, where denarration operates less through contradiction than through exhaustive enumeration. The repeated description of Mr. Graves's daily visits—four times a day, every day, for the same banal purposes—reveals how narrative can remain logically consistent while nonetheless collapsing into stasis (Beckett 2009, 122). Narration here proceeds through the intentional repetition of banal actions, producing the unsettling realization that, however scrupulously narrated, the story is going nowhere. Third-person narration still lends the illusion of coherence and authority, but cracks begin to appear, particularly in moments when the narrator intrudes or reveals uncertainty, as with the sudden emergence of "*Sam*" as a narratorial presence (Beckett 2009, 3).

With *The Trilogy*, denarration intensifies and becomes central rather than incidental. The multiplication of narrators—*Molloy*, *Moran*, *Malone*, *Mahood*—creates a succession of voices that seem less like distinct characters than variations or displacements of a single narrating consciousness. As each narrator replaces or overwrites the previous one, narrative identity becomes increasingly unstable. The journey motif, still present in *Molloy*, is repeatedly deferred, disrupted, or rendered

incoherent, as the narrator falls out of sequence with himself, never quite arriving at the point from which his story is supposedly told (Beckett 2010, 69–76).

By the time we reach *The Unnamable*, narrative space collapses almost entirely into the act of narration itself. No stable setting can be verified, no bodily position securely fixed, and no character identity definitively named. The narrator's fixation on continuing, "*you can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on,*" foregrounds narration as compulsion rather than representation (Beckett 2010, 38). What remains is not a world being narrated but the narrating act exposed in its barest form, oscillating between the desire to end and the necessity to continue.

This progression from early fiction to *The Trilogy* reveals denarration not as an abrupt rupture but as a gradual dismantling of narrative supports. As Van Hulle notes, Beckett's work increasingly abandons the "*succession of individuals*" characteristic of conventional narrative in favor of a recursive exploration of narrative consciousness itself (Van Hulle 2009, 130). Denarration thus marks the point at which narrative no longer guarantees a world beyond language, but instead turns inward, staging its own failure—and persistence—as its primary subject.

### 3. Drama, Performance, and the Denarrated Stage

In Beckett's drama, denarration becomes materially embodied through voice, gesture, and silence, transforming narrational negation into a theatrical event rather than a purely textual strategy. Beckett's turn to drama does not reverse the denarrative trajectory traced in the novels but instead relocates it within the conditions of theatrical performance. *Waiting for Godot*, written during a period of difficulty with *The Unnamable*, inherits the denarrated world of Beckett's prose fiction: indeterminate time and place, apparitional characters, and a conspicuous absence of conventional plot. The play appears, at first glance, radically different from the dense and tortuous syntax of the novels; yet it emerges against the vast background of Beckett's denarrating narrators and shares with them a fundamental skepticism toward narrative progression.

The opening line of the play, Estragon's "*Nothing to be done,*" exemplifies this continuity while also revealing the distinct logic of denarration on stage. In prose, such a statement may function as a narratorial reflection or philosophical claim; in performance, however, it is immediately contradicted by the visible presence of the actor speaking, moving, and persisting before an audience. The comic effect of the line depends precisely on this contradiction: the performer denies the possibility of action at the very moment he performs one. As you note in the original article, it is "*far different to read 'Nothing to be done' in a text than to see it being performed,*" since theatrical presence renders denial itself performative rather than purely linguistic (Beckett, 2006).

This tension highlights a crucial difference between prose denarration and dramatic denarration. In the novel, a narrator may deny his own presence with relative plausibility, given the inherent separation between text and reader. On stage, by contrast, denial occurs in the presence of embodied performers and in the shared time of performance. Silence, pauses, and repetition thus take on heightened significance,

functioning not as absences of narrative but as sites where narrative possibility is suspended, intensified, or exposed. The theatrical frame makes visible what Beckett's prose increasingly thematizes: that narration persists not despite its failures, but through them.

In Krapp's Last Tape, the convergence of prose and drama becomes explicit. Krapp sits alone in a room, narrating and listening to himself narrate, interrupting, rewinding, and replaying recorded fragments of his past. The play stages narration as a physical and temporal struggle, governed by bodily needs, mechanical breakdowns, and obsessive repetition. Krapp repeatedly stops the tape mid-sentence—to eat, to drink, to consult a dictionary—only to resume or abandon it moments later. These interruptions produce a layered temporality in which past and present selves coexist without cohering into a stable narrative account (Beckett, Krapp's Last Tape).

As Gontarski observes, Krapp's Last Tape marks a moment in Beckett's creative trajectory where *"the differences between prose fiction and stage monologues begin to fade"* (Gontarski 1985, 55). The play dramatizes the same denarrative logic at work in The Trilogy: narration no longer guarantees access to a coherent past or unified self, but instead exposes the act of narrating as provisional, compulsive, and subject to interruption. The recorded voice, ostensibly preserved and repeatable, proves just as unstable as the spoken one, undermined by Krapp's present interventions and refusals.

What distinguishes dramatic denarration in Beckett, then, is not the abandonment of narrative but its embodiment. The stage renders visible the conditions—silence, repetition, bodily presence, mechanical mediation—under which narration persists after the collapse of narrative authority. In this sense, Beckett's drama does not stand apart from his prose but continues its investigation of what narrative can still do once its traditional supports have been dismantled. Performance becomes another medium through which denarration exposes, and paradoxically sustains, the compulsion to go on.

#### 4. Late Prose and the Minimal Conditions of Narrative

Beckett's later prose works—Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho, and The Way—reduce narrative to what might be called its minimal conditions: voice, darkness, bodily position, and the injunction to continue, to *"say on."* By this stage in Beckett's writing, most conventional narrative supports have been dismantled. There is little sense of plot, character development, or stable setting. What remains is the act of narration itself, exposed in its most attenuated and self-conscious form.

The company offers a particularly clear articulation of this reduced narrative situation. The text repeatedly returns to the image of *"one on his back in the dark,"* accompanied by a voice that both addresses and invents him (Beckett 2009, 3). The use of the second-person address—*"You are on your back in the dark"*—invites the reader into a performative relation with the text, blurring distinctions between narrator, character, and reader. As you suggest in the original article, this *"You"* can function extratextually, extending beyond the diegetic frame to implicate the reader in the act of imagining. Denarration here does not eliminate narrative possibility but multiplies it, allowing

scenes of "*verisimilitude*" to appear and disappear without requiring confirmation of their truth status.

This oscillation between imagined scenes and abstract narration exemplifies what Richardson describes as the double movement of denarration: the simultaneous dismantling and regeneration of narrative worlds (Richardson 2001, 170). Rather than stabilizing a single narrative reality, Beckett's late prose allows multiple, incompatible scenes to coexist, their value lying not in representational accuracy but in their performative emergence. The narrative event becomes the act of imagining itself.

The recurrence of words such as "*on*" and "*way*" functions as a linguistic trace of narrative movement after the erosion of plot and character. In *Worstward Ho*, the imperative to continue—"Say on"—appears detached from any identifiable speaker or addressee, suggesting narration reduced to its barest verbal impulse (Beckett 2009, 81). Movement is no longer spatial or teleological but verbal and iterative, enacted through repetition rather than progression. Narrative becomes circular rather than linear, a matter of returning again and again to the same minimal gestures.

This logic is carried even further in *The Way*, where symbolic figures—the loop, the figure-eight—precede the text and contain in miniature the narrative movements that follow. As you note in the original article, the statement that "*the one way back was on and on was only back*" collapses forward motion into endless return, suggesting both the infinity and the futility of narrative continuation (Beckett 1996, 125). Here, narrative persists not through representation of a world but through the sustained enactment of linguistic motion.

Across these late prose works, denarration reaches a point where narrative no longer depends on character, setting, or plot, but on the minimal conditions of voice and continuation. As Malina argues, the dissolution of boundaries between narrative levels in texts such as *Company* produces a form of metalepsis that draws the reader into the narrative process itself (Malina 2002, 61). Beckett's late prose thus reveals denarration not as an endpoint but as a means of reconfiguring narrative at its most elemental—where to narrate is simply to go on speaking, even in the dark.

## 5. Conclusion

Across Beckett's prose and drama, denarration operates not as a terminal negation of narrative but as a means of exposing the fragile mechanisms by which narrative persists. By dismantling plot, character, and verisimilitude, Beckett does not bring storytelling to an end; rather, he clears a space in which narrative can reemerge in minimal, provisional, and performative forms. Voice, silence, repetition, and interruption become the basic materials of storytelling, sustaining narrative even after its traditional supports have been withdrawn.

Tracing this movement from the early fiction through *The Trilogy*, into the drama, and finally into the late prose reveals denarration as a continuous and evolving poetics rather than a late stylistic rupture. What changes is not Beckett's preoccupation with narrative itself, but the degree to which narration turns back upon its own conditions. As

Richardson suggests, denarration allows us to witness not a stable world being inconsistently described, but a world being repeatedly made and unmade through language (Richardson 2001, 170). Beckett radicalizes this insight by relocating narrative from the representation of events to the act of narrating as such.

In the drama, this denarrative logic becomes embodied. The stage renders visible the contradictions that prose can only imply: the speaking body that denies action, the silence that heightens narrative expectancy, the repetition that both exhausts and sustains meaning. In works such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, narration persists not despite interruption and failure, but through them, confirming Gontarski's observation that Beckett's later drama increasingly converges with the concerns of the prose (Gontarski 1985, 55).

By the time we reach the late prose—*Company*, *Worstward Ho*, *The Way*—narrative has been reduced to its most elemental gestures: a voice in the dark, a body at rest, the imperative to "*say on.*" Here, denarration no longer threatens narrative with disappearance; it becomes the very condition of narrative's survival. As Beckett's narrators insist, one cannot go on, yet must go on—a paradox that defines narrative not as a completed structure but as an ongoing act.

In this sense, Beckett's work does not mark the end of narrative but its radical reconfiguration. Denarration reveals narrative as something fragile, iterative, and performative—always provisional, always at risk, yet stubbornly persistent. What remains, finally, is not a story told to completion, but the human compulsion to continue speaking, imagining, and narrating, even when there seems to be nothing left to say. Beckett's denarrated texts thus demonstrate that narrative does not depend on completeness, coherence, or even belief in a represented world. What persists is narration as an act — iterative, provisional, and performative. In this sense, Beckett does not bring narrative to an end; he reveals the minimal conditions under which it continues to be possible.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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