“Fail again. Fail better. [...] Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. [...] Fail better worse now.”¹ By the writer who most famously explored the theme of failure, Samuel Beckett, this sequence is one of the most famous instances, from his final extended prose narrative essay in failure, Worstward Ho. With all that failing going on, it’s tempting to read Beckett as a pessimist, but that would be an easy way out. For one, it would miss the comedy, the residual humor that is present even in these bare late texts, the puns on words and worse, the joke of a narrative that keeps trying to fail, but seems to fail even at that. Failing falling flat.

Neither, however, can we say Beckett is an optimist. Instead, I propose that what we’re seeing here is an exploration of what logicians call the excluded third. In classical logic, a proposition is either true, or it isn’t. There is no third way. However, in intuitionist logic, an alternative system first developed by the Dutch logician Luitzen Egbertus Jan Brouwer², there is a third way that cannot be ruled out. For intuitionists, a proposition may be demonstrably true, or it may be demonstrably false (= not true), or it may be demonstrably not false – but if it is “not false,” one can’t conclude, like you could in classical logic, that it is true. It is merely not not true. Furthermore, I propose that this not-not-true, this failure to fail, is a logical modality that is very apt for describing our relation with the real, in this case, the real of language, of speaking, of telling.

It’s quite easy to imagine a purely positive approach to telling. Tell it like it is. The act of speaking as positive production. The easiest examples of course being straightforward realisms, or perhaps conventional genre constructions. Kinds of writing that are often met with suspicion by those of a more critical inclination: pure positivity might be all too naively affirmative, it might present us with a picture of the world that is all too unproblematic, or even untrue. But positivity need not be inherently problematic. There’s nothing really wrong with honest genre craftsmanship, as long as it doesn’t degenerate into dogmatism, pretending to present some ultimate criterium for realism³. On the other hand, the sheer materiality, the sheer focus on textual productivity that can be found in an experimental writer like Gertrude Stein, with her emphatic belief in her own genius,⁴ too, can be seen as a very positive mode of telling, though this time one that might even have revolutionary potential, as it just keeps moving and producing. At its best, it’s a free exploration of tale-space, creating as it goes, producing excitement and excess, and producing tale-space itself along the way.

The negative mode to telling could be adequately represented by the critical inclination men-
tioned above. The sense of negativity is useful, for it warns us that we shouldn’t start believing in our representations. Essentially the negative mode is critical of words. The words we use cannot mean what we want them to mean; our use of words is a form of violence done to real experience; words fail us. Tale-space here exists as a warning or a prohibition: a reality that constantly withdraws itself from our words. Such tendencies can be found in monotheistic prohibitions against the depiction of God, or within the Romantic poetic tradition of sublime experience, but this kind of negativity of course also comes up in much more everyday situations, when people say that words fail them to describe some particularly intense emotion or experience, usually one of utter shock or grief. Failure here is the realization that there might well exist some reality, but we are not capable of describing it.

What is so interesting about Beckett’s mode of telling here is how it seems to fall in between. “from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither,” as it says in the opera Neither. It’s a telling that seems to want to tell, yet within full awareness of the negative mode at the same time, using the critical mode as the very condition for the positive mode. Almost every sentence of Worstward Ho is gripped by the opposite forces of this tension at the same time. And the injunction to “fail better” makes this mode of positive/negative telling an explicit aim. But of course, if you set out to fail, you really can’t fail; because if you succeed at failing, you fail, which means you really have succeeded and not failed at all. Hence the continuous attempt to fail better, or fail worse, which is the same thing.

So is the mode of telling fully determined if we call it a paradox and have it done with? In classical logic, that would be merely a reason to relegate Beckett to the junk heap of logical inconsistency. A more literary reading of Beckett would rather say that the paradox is fueling Beckett’s continuous attempts to remain faithful to his impossible project of failure, which means he can’t go on, must go on, and therefore will go on: the logical paradox of the failure to fail turns into literary device, which is a perpetual breathing out of an impossibility of not continuing — at least, not until the book is done.

However, we shouldn’t do away with logic quite yet. By focusing on Beckett’s continuing as the real center of his work, we might miss how his telling functions in the moment of telling itself. There is a logic at work in this moment, pointing at some enigmatic spectral space outside of success and failure: a third option, the intuitionists’ perhaps. The “failure to fail” may not be merely a paradox, inconsistently shifting between positiv-
ress that Beckett’s texts make, as a result of their inability to find a halt. This is a way of reading that stresses what one could call the projective movement in the texture of Beckett’s writing. That element is undoubtedly present, but the uncertainty of Beckett’s specifically non-negative mode of telling also depends on a more retrospective aspect of Beckett’s text. As the telling speaks, it leaves behind an inextinguishable trace of logical rhythm and narrative melody. The failure to fail does not (only) refer to that which inevitably is yet to come as the text is “said on,” but perhaps even more primarily, to that which it has continuously been creating.

A true complexity of Beckett’s textuality resides in this interplay of the projective and the retrospective. At its densest and most intense, every single word seems to point forward and backward at the same time. Here, again a comparison with Gertrude Stein is illuminating. Steins texts are extremely exciting, precisely because they always stress infinite forward motion, letting you get as close to the real body of language as possible in a continuous present, and letting you experience it the way the genius Stein directly experienced it (at least, that is what is being suggested). She constructs fantastically dynamic paragraphs that may not necessarily say “something,” yet every word keeps pointing forward, keeps promising a description, and thereby these paragraphs are entirely positive modes of textual production. Here’s a typical example from Patriarchal Poetry:

For before let it before to be before to spell to be before to be before to have to be to be for before to be tell to be to having held to be to be for before to call to be for to be before to till until to be till before to be for before to be until to be for before to for to be for before will for before to shall to be to be for to be for to be before still to will before to be before for to be to be for before to be before such to be for to be much before to be for before will be for to be for before to be well to be well before to be before for before might while to be might before to be might while to be might before while to be might to be while before for might to be for before to for while to be while for before while before to for which as for before had for before had for before to for to before.

Note how most of the words here are words that by their syntactic structure point to the next word, with an important role for prepositions and conjunctions and a paucity of words that would imply a halt in the syntax, such as nouns might do. Word by word, the sentence is being pushed forward. Intriguingly, even a negative formula will be pointing forward in Stein, witness this sentence from An Acquaintance with Description: “To describe it not as dew because it is in the trees.” The word “not” is a word that points to the next word. If we desire to know what “not” refers to, we must look at the next word, which is “as,” which again requires us to look further; after a brief pause at the noun “dew,” we immediately get more promise of explanation (“because”). By contrast, let’s look at Beckett’s use of the negative as a textural device, as it appears at the opening of Texts for Nothing:

SUDDENLY, NO, AT LAST, long last, I couldn’t any more, I couldn’t go on.

The negative here is already the second word. However, it does not merely point forward to generate narrative energy and excitement. The word “no” is a corrective to what came before as well as a preparation for what comes after. It points in two directions at once: a double temporal tension is active within this second word already.

Here again a failure to fail. “No” says that the word “suddenly” (which seems quite apt to mark the setting in motion of storytelling) has failed. Therefore, “no” includes a failure, yet at the same time it promises an alternative to come, and so it produces its own presence as a complex temporal tension within the text. This simultaneously projective and retrospective operation is typical of Beckett’s narrative rhythm. Through it, his texts point to a very basic tension within words as such.

This basic tension is one key dimension of the real in language. Neither do our words merely say what we want them to say, as a naïve story would have us believe; nor do they merely fail to say something too vast to be told. What is real is the fact that in spite of our using them, rightly or wrongly as the case might be, our words are saying something. Something physical, something that our bodily act of telling is saying on top of what we mean to say. In our speaking them, something is always being added to their meanings. Meanings exist, but they fall prey to our utterances themselves; our utterances themselves are what make the meanings into such dynamic creatures. Entirely because of our saying them, our words are saying things, things of their own besides things of ours. Utterance produces a little melody, a pattern, coming in from narrative outer space, to virally infect our words and to haunt our tales. An excess, a nothing that we have to say and we are saying it. A tune we can’t get rid of.
Notes


2 For an online introduction to intuitionism, see [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-intuitionistic/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-intuitionistic/)

3 Usually, a good action movie cannot do much harm, as long as the action is ridiculous and spectacular and no attempt at narrative credibility is made. When, however, attempts are made at believability or psychological realism, that is usually the point where the action movie’s politics become operatic in a pernicious way, precisely by becoming hidden and naturalized.

4 Stein’s obsession with genius and her very high opinion of herself is ubiquitous in much of her reflective writing, present both in the autobiographical and in the poetical texts. One famous definition she gives of a genius is that of ‘being one who is one at one and at the same time telling and listening to anything or everything.’ (Lecture 3 from *Narration*, quoted from Stein: *Writings 1932-1946* [New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998], 342). Note how “genius” is indeed precisely related to an ability to produce telling unchecked by anything else that might be going on. It is thoroughly positive and productive.


6 This interplay is present, too, in the title of the trilogy itself, *Nohow On*, with its mirroring of the “no” (a denial with a retrospective character, as shown below) and the projective “on.”


8 Stein was acutely aware of this link between syntax and rhythm. As she writes in her lecture *Poetry and Grammar*, “Verbs and adverbs and articles and conjunctions and prepositions are lively because they all do something and as long as anything does something it keeps alive.” In this text, nouns are denounced as being simply either “adequate” as names, or not; neither option is interesting. Prepositions, however, are praised, because they “can live one long life being really being nothing but absolutely nothing but mistaken and that makes them irritating if you feel that way about mistakes but certainly something that you can be continuously using and everlastingly enjoying” (Stein, *Writings 1932-1946*, 313-316).

9 Prepositions as such already belong to the negative, in that they can be absolutely nothing but mistaken. See the endnote above. The inner life of prepositions forms the rhythmical model for negativity in Stein’s writing.


11 In: Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose*, p. 100