

**“The Means to Put an End to Things”:  
Samuel Beckett and the Idea of the Uninterpretable Work**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis responds to a long-established consensus around the work of Samuel Beckett: namely, that it is singularly resistant to interpretation and yet its capacity to resist interpretation can be understood through Beckett's own comments and through claims implicit in the work itself. In his fictional writings and critical essays as well as his correspondence and reported comments, Beckett frequently insists that "the labour of composition" does not involve the artist's intellect, and accordingly he recommends a mode of reception that places little weight on the search for meanings or messages. Particularly in Beckett's fictional texts, these recommendations are often accompanied by begrudging, oblique acknowledgements that the mode of reception they describe is an impossible one, since audiences and readers are consistently imagined to be possessed by a fundamental need to "make sense" of the work. This thesis elucidates the dialogue with that imagined need that underlies so much of Beckett's work by drawing upon modern theoretical accounts of the inevitability of interpretation offered by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Peter Bürger, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, Lionel Abel, Derek Attridge, and Charles Taylor. It is divided into four chapters that investigate how Beckett's work operates under the weight of such logics of interpretation and that discuss the relation between Beckett's anti-hermeneutic leanings and contemporaneous debates about artistic expression and proper modes of reception. In light of these discussions, each chapter re-evaluates one of Beckett's rhetorical or stylistic strategies for "work[ing] on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect": among these are de-centering or de-authorizing forms of multi-vocality; overt reliance on clichéd phrases and generic conventions; non-productive expenditures of words and events, particularly in the form of repetition; and meta-theatrical play with the unstable relationship between a performed play and a written script. Ultimately, the thesis shows that the Beckettian resistance to interpretation is not as singular as is commonly thought, and it opens up room for readings and adaptations of Beckett's works that do not necessarily conform wholly to received notions of what Beckett would or would not have authorized.

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## **DECLARATION**

This thesis is my own, original work. No portion of it has been published or submitted for examination elsewhere.

## INTRODUCTION

What does it all mean? This question is evoked throughout Beckett's work despite the fact that it is usually shown to be misguided or moot. In *Happy Days*, a perplexed onlooker comically asks what Winnie is "meant to mean"; in *Footfalls*, May proves tragically unable to stop "revolving it all" (CDW, 156, 403). The same question is central to Beckett's reception despite a general suspicion that it is irrelevant or irresolvable. There is a long-established consensus that Beckett's work is singularly resistant to interpretation, and yet its capacity to resist interpretation is widely thought to be understandable through Beckett's own comments and through claims of intelligibility and unintelligibility implicit in the work itself.

This thesis responds to that consensus. Its fundamental argument is that, although Beckett takes the rhetoric of uninterpretability to an extreme, the stylistic and rhetorical tools his work deploys are nevertheless embedded within debates about the proper modes of artistic expression and reception that marked the contexts in which he worked as a writer. I consider areas in which Beckett's own prescriptions against searches for resolution, intellectual certainties, realistic explanations, or hidden meanings and messages seem especially clear or strong, or especially crucial to his ongoing reception, addressing his early criticism, his interventions into interpretations of his own work, his work composed during the famous "siege in the room," and the published texts of his plays. I show that the anti-hermeneutic leanings evident in these areas resonate with ideas developed by many of Beckett's contemporaries or near-contemporaries, among whom are writers such as Marcel Proust and James Joyce, writers and artists sympathetic

with Dada and Surrealism, and less easily categorized writers such as Václav Havel. I elucidate these resonances by drawing upon influential theoretical debates about the inevitability of interpretation, ultimately opening up room for readings and adaptations of Beckett's works that do not necessarily conform wholly to received ideas about what Beckett would or would not have authorized.

It is indeed a fundamental irony in Beckett studies that a diverse collection of writings widely considered to be “particularly, perhaps uniquely, resistant to interpretation,” as Simon Critchley puts it, should continue to inspire a seemingly endless series of new interpretations for new times and places.<sup>1</sup> The early plays, which first brought Beckett's work to the attention of a mass audience, played a particular role in this ceaselessly renewed interest: the initial productions of *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, caused a veritable furor among theater critics eager to denounce or defend the play, and to this day stage adaptations of Beckett's work continue to stimulate lively reviews in newspaper columns. As Stephen Watt points out, writers such as John Banville, Paul Muldoon, and Tom Stoppard have all professed their debts to Beckett's work, and vaguely defined Beckettian themes of “something taking its course,” of “events [...] set in motion [...] produc[ing] ineffable senses of encroachment,” have resonated strongly with, and perhaps even brought some comfort to, ordinary individuals in the wake of real-life catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina and the September 11 attacks.<sup>2</sup> Beckett's plays are constantly being revived in London, a summer school has been dedicated solely to his work at Trinity College Dublin, and new scholarly editions of his prose and drama are regularly released—all in admiration of an author who famously wrote that “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail” (*PTD*, 125).<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), 141; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> Watt, *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3–7.

<sup>3</sup> This line was considered representative enough of Beckett's ethos to have become the title of the *Festschrift* for Beckett's eightieth birthday. See John Calder, ed., *As No Other Dare Fail: For Samuel Beckett on His 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday by His Friends and Admirers* (New York: Calder Publications, 1986). For an idea of the sheer number of Beckett productions every year, see for example Kate Stanbury, “Samuel Beckett Season for Barbican 2015,” *Official London Theatre*, 17

irony is perhaps most evident in the relatively recent popularity of the “fail better” quotation from Beckett’s *Worstward Ho*—“Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”—a quotation that *Harry Potter* star Daniel Radcliffe reportedly wants to have made into his first tattoo, since he believes that it resonates with his conviction that “growing up is about aiming to succeed but being fulfilled by failing very well.”<sup>4</sup> This thesis is not a reception history, but it draws impetus from such ironies, reckoning with the fact that Beckett’s oeuvre manifestly inspires positivity as well as negativity, accomplishment as well as failure, productivity as well as reduction, and popular appeal as well as esoteric obscurity.

The “fail better” aphorism has seemed to some to reflect a relatively straightforward philosophy for living despite the fact that it is drawn from a work of fiction. This may be because, as is the case in many other instances throughout Beckett’s oeuvre, it deploys a playful self-reflexiveness that blurs the line between, or even renders indistinguishable, fictional narrative and quasi-fictional commentary on that narrative. Conversely, it is also the case that many of Beckett’s nonfictional writings and comments have acquired a status within his canon comparable to that of his fictional work. It is not too much of a stretch to say that associations between Beckett’s work and a certain resistance to interpretation have been shaped significantly by his perceived critical attitudes. In his critical writings, Beckett withholds his harshest criticism when addressing those writers and artists whom he sees as belonging to no school or movement. In “Recent Irish Poetry,” for example, Beckett heaps scorn upon the “antiquarians,” those poets associated with the Irish Literary Revival, but his descriptions of Thomas MacGreevy, “an

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September 2014, <[officiallondontheatre.co.uk/news/latest-news/article/item240067/samuel-beckett-season-for-barbican-2015/](http://officiallondontheatre.co.uk/news/latest-news/article/item240067/samuel-beckett-season-for-barbican-2015/)>. Since the Grove Centenary Editions of Samuel Beckett, the most recent editions include the *Collected Poems*, ed. Seán Lawlor and John Pilling (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), and the first ever publication of Beckett’s jettisoned short story *Echo’s Bones*, ed. Mark Nixon (New York: Grove Press, 2014). For information on the annual Samuel Beckett Summer School at Trinity College Dublin see <[beckettsummerschool.wordpress.com](http://beckettsummerschool.wordpress.com)>.

<sup>4</sup> Radcliffe quoted in Mark O’Connell, “The Stunning Success of ‘Fail Better’: How Samuel Beckett Became Silicon Valley’s Life Coach,” *Slate*, 29 January 2014, <[slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/01/samuel\\_beckett\\_s\\_quote\\_fail\\_better\\_becomes\\_the\\_mantra\\_of\\_silicon\\_valley.html](http://slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/01/samuel_beckett_s_quote_fail_better_becomes_the_mantra_of_silicon_valley.html)>. See also Beckett, *Company / Ill Seen Ill Said / Worstward Ho / Stirrings Still*, ed. Dirk Van Hulle (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 81.



independent,” and of Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, who are said to draw on a wide range of influences, are more complimentary (*D*, 70–76). This tendency to prioritize the individual artist over the movement has arguably fed into a certain scholarly consternation over placing Beckett himself squarely within any particular movement.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Beckett’s well-known comment to James Knowlson that there is nothing ambiguous about the protagonist raising his head at the end of *Catastrophe*, like his disparagement of those critics who “want to have headaches among the overtones,” can inspire a certain reluctance to read his work on theoretical terms not concretely suggested within it or within his letters, notes, or comments.<sup>6</sup>

Even these more cautious approaches rarely, if ever, lead to any definitive resolution, for Beckett’s own thinking on how artistic expression should be understood was inconsistent, constantly vacillating and evolving. Both within the work and outside the work, he seems to use differing terms and conceptual schemes to anticipate, prescribe, and proscribe particular modes of reception. At times what seems to be resisted is the conviction that an aesthetic experience can or ought to be explained; at other times the core problem seems to be the idea that the author has special or privileged knowledge about the work; another formulation aims to inspire a certain somatic response in an audience; yet there are also instances in which even such somatic responses are presented as inappropriate or crude, when the only appropriate response to artistic

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<sup>5</sup> Even in his introduction to the *Complete Short Prose*, an introduction presumably aimed at a general rather than a specialist audience, S. E. Gontarski notes the ongoing uncertainty around whether Beckett ought to be classed as a modernist or a postmodernist (*CSP*, xxv). More recently, scholars such as Shane Weller and Peter Fifield have used the term “late modernism.” Weller, “Beckett and Late Modernism,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. Dirk Van Hulle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 89–102. Fifield, *Late Modernist Style in Samuel Beckett and Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>6</sup> For the comment on *Catastrophe*, see Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1996), 680; hereafter cited parenthetically. The “headaches among the overtones” comment appears in Maurice Harmon, ed., *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 24. Between 2006 and 2008, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* published a spate of articles in which Garin Dowd and Matthew Feldman debated the merits of strictly positivist methodology. Feldman, “Beckett and Popper, or, ‘What Stink of Artifice’: Some Notes on Methodology, Falsifiability, and Criticism in Beckett Studies,” *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 16 (2006): 373–91; Dowd, “Prolegomena to a Critique of Excavatory Reason: Reply to Matthew Feldman,” *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 20 (2008): 375–88; Feldman, “In Defence of Empirical Knowledge: Rejoinder to ‘A Critique of Excavatory Reason,’” *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 20 (2008): 389–99.

expression seems to be bewilderment or confusion, or even no response at all. The field of hermeneutics around Beckett treats the issue of interpretation in equally varied ways. My own method is to take on board such diversity, mapping out the diverse resonances between Beckett's changing ideas and wider issues and debates in a way that complicates current discussions about how to approach Beckett's work.

Even if the inconsistencies in Beckett's own attitudes toward interpretation are put aside, deference to certain received anecdotes about Beckett's critical stances are still somewhat ironic given that there is a relatively small number of readily available sources from which they might be deduced. Beckett was notoriously reticent to comment on his own work; he rarely gave interviews or made public appearances; and he wrote merely a handful of critical articles, of which only those collected in the slim collection *Disjecta* are easily accessible, and some of which remain untranslated from the French to this day. It might be this relative lack of input into the interpretation of his work that has led those of Beckett's letters and (mostly occasional) critical pieces that have been collected, and the few recollections and anecdotes of Beckett's comments that remain in general circulation, to have acquired a special weight. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of Israel Shenker's 1956 newspaper article "Moody Man of Letters," which has Beckett saying that he works with "ignorance" as opposed to Joyce's "tending toward omniscience": arguably, this single line has become one of the most familiar touchstones in Beckett studies.<sup>7</sup>

This commonplace tendency—referring to a small range of anecdotes about Beckett as a way of understanding his work—recurs outside of academic work, and particularly in the press. Consider, for example, an article by Michael Hall that appeared in the *Guardian* on the occasion

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<sup>7</sup> Israel Shenker, "An Interview with Beckett (1956)," in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge, 1979), 148; hereafter cited parenthetically. Originally published as "Moody Man of Letters," *New York Times*, 5 May 1956, Section II, 1, 3. It is important to note that this is only a hypothetical interview. All of Beckett's statements in it are quoted second hand, and no sources are cited.

of Beckett's centenary. Hall aims to initiate "beginners" by describing the artistic "epiphany" Beckett reported having beside his mother's deathbed:

What he saw [...] was that, like Joyce, he had been striving for literary power, for control over the material, when in fact his whole zone of being lay in that area of impotence, of ignorance, of stupidity. [...] This was something which he was then able to channel in an exploration of what he saw as the essentials of being.<sup>8</sup>

Here Hall quotes James Knowlson, who is rightly described as a "pre-eminent Beckett scholar," but what is re-iterated by Knowlson for the readership of the *Guardian* is not something familiar only to faithful readers of Beckett scholarship. Recording his conversations with Beckett in his memoir, Charles Juliet writes also of Beckett's "brusque revelation."<sup>9</sup> Juliet relates this revelation to the moment in *Krapp's Last Tape* in which Krapp offers fragmented recollections of a similar "vision at last," which Krapp had at a lighthouse near "the house on the canal where mother lay a-dying"—"What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life [...] clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most" (*CDW*, 220)—a moment that Juliet identifies with Beckett's putative real-life experience on a "night in Dublin, at the end of a jetty, while a storm was raging" (15).

The jetty in Juliet's account is identifiable with the pier at Dún Laoghaire, and the associations between it and Beckett's artistic realization remain so prevalent today that visitors to the pier—among whom, especially in the summertime, are significant numbers of tourists—will see a plaque bearing a portrait of Beckett and an excerpt from Krapp's recollection of his "vision

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<sup>8</sup> James Knowlson quoted in Michael Hall, "More Kicks than You Might Think," *Guardian*, 13 April 2006, <[theguardian.com/stage/2006/apr/13/beckettat100.theatre](http://theguardian.com/stage/2006/apr/13/beckettat100.theatre)>.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, trans. Tracy Cooke, Aude Jeanson, Axel Nesme, Morgaine Reinl, and Janey Tucker (1973; London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009), 15; hereafter cited parenthetically.

at last.”<sup>10</sup> The image itself, a close-up of Beckett’s bust against a blank background, resonates with a number of similar images of Beckett’s face against a black background, all of which seem related to a widespread association between Beckett’s work and the idea of his “vision,” “epiphany,” or “revelation” in the dark. For readers such as Juliet and Hall, that association leads to the conclusion that the appropriate approach to Beckett’s work is to do as little interpreting as possible, to shut down the intellectual faculties and succumb instead to the pure feeling of contemplation. Juliet writes disparagingly of “intellectual decency, knowledge, the certainties one invents for oneself, the need to dominate life” and focuses on his own emotional responses to Beckett’s work (16). Similarly, Hall quotes Brendan Behan as a good example for the readership of the *Guardian* to follow: “I don't understand what Samuel Beckett’s works are about. [...] But I don't understand what a swim in the ocean is about. I just love the flow of the water over my body.”<sup>11</sup>

Many instances of self-reflexiveness within Beckett’s works seem to lead to similar appeals to readers to give up on searches for explanations or hidden meanings, as numerous scholars and readers have long recognized. Eric P. Levy, for example, comments that “Beckettian texts often challenge—or perhaps even taunt—the reader or audience regarding the task of interpretation,” pointing to examples from *Watt* (“and he wondered what the artist intended to represent”), *Texts for Nothing* (“let him understand who can”), *How It Is* (“let him understand who has a wish to”), and *Play* (“looking for sense where possibly there is none”).<sup>12</sup> And indeed many readers have interpreted such moments of self-reflexiveness as warnings against over-interpretation. In his foreword to Beckett’s *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, for

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<sup>10</sup> Knowlson points out Beckett’s eagerness to distinguish between himself and Krapp—“Krapp’s vision was on the pier at Dún Laoghaire; mine was in my mother’s room. Make that clear once and for all”—and Knowlson quotes a 1986 letter from Beckett to Richard Ellmann in which Beckett writes, “All the jetty and howling wind are imaginary. It happened to me, summer 1945, in my mother’s little house, named New Place, across the road from Cooldrinagh” (Knowlson, 352, 772n55).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Hall, “More Kicks than You Might Think.”

<sup>12</sup> Levy, *Trapped in Thought: A Study of the Beckettian Mentality* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 1.

example, Eoin O'Brien cites Belacqua's comments on "creative integrity," on "the object that becomes invisible before your eyes," and on "the incoherent continuum as expressed by, say, Rimbaud and Beethoven[,] [...] the terms of whose statements serve merely to delimit the reality of insane areas of silence," comments that O'Brien equates with Beckett's "unique vision" (*DFMW*, xvi). Belacqua's allusion to Beethoven seems to be what leads to O'Brien's later suggestion that "the reader can simply hum the tune and the air is a catching one" (*DFMW*, xix).

This type of self-reflexiveness recurs in the prose. There are the multiple appeals to the "dear reader" or "attentive reader" by the narrators of *Murphy* and *Watt*, appeals that tend to mock rather than indulge the misguided intellectual efforts of an imagined reader "at a loss to understand" (these echo similar appeals made by the narrators of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks than Kicks*). There is the final, much-quoted line of *Watt*, "no symbols where none intended," a line that warns against interpretation and that seems attributable to the implied author of the work given its appearance in the "addenda" section of the novel.<sup>13</sup> There is the character Sam in *Watt*, who like Mr. Beckett in *Dream* is apparently a fictionalized version of the author himself. Such characters relate to the events of the novels in which they appear in oblique ways, suggesting that there is little authorial control underlying the voices that emerge from the text. In addition to these, there is Murphy and his account of his "dark," an account of a certain mindlessness that constitutes the crux of the book, yet one that literal-minded readers are sarcastically invited to skip over. There is Mr. Endon, into whose eyes Murphy attempts to look as deeply as possible in a manner that Peter Boxall likens to an ideally erotic relationship between reader and author.<sup>14</sup> There is Molloy and his contempt for the figure who comes and collects Molloy's writings in order to edit them (as if Molloy had anything coherent to express). There is Moran, who at the end of *Molloy* admits that he began his narrative by lying to his imagined

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<sup>13</sup> Beckett, *Watt* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 223.

<sup>14</sup> Boxall, "Nothing of Value: Reading Beckett's Negativity," in *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett*, ed. Daniela Caselli (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 36; hereafter cited parenthetically.

reader about the time and the weather. And there is Malone, who manifestly records his stories not in order to express any meaning or message, but rather in response to some obscure need arising from his knowledge of his imminent death.

While individual characters and narrators become more difficult to categorize in the prose written after *Malone Dies*—which in a 1948 letter to Georges Duthuit Beckett described as “the last” of a “series” beginning with *Murphy* (LII, 80)—it seems clear that the late short fiction similarly resists interpretation in self-conscious ways. Consider, for example, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, in which the image of the “rotunda” appears despite the fact that the “imagination” of the narrator is apparently “dead” (CSP, 182). There is also *Company*, in which the opening line, “A voice comes to one in the dark, imagine,” seems to suggest that the narrating voice is somehow not quite identical to itself.<sup>15</sup> And there is *Stirrings Still*, in which the narrating voice, the “he” of the text, and the “himself” whom “he” sees, all appear to be simultaneously the same subject and not the same subject (CSP, 259). The voices and figures emerging from these texts articulate a type of self-estrangement, a lack of control over vision, action, and utterance, that many have seen as offering a self-reflexive metacommentary on the uncontrolled quality of Beckett’s creative process. S. E. Gontarski glosses it as a “foregrounding of mysterious voices, external to the perceiving part of self” that suggests “what literary critics have too often failed to articulate”: namely, the “immediacy and emotional power” of Beckett’s short fiction (CSP, xvi–xviii). What Gontarski’s gloss suggests is that, like Beckett’s own comments, these instances of metacommentary consistently recommend that readers of the prose abandon any “need to dominate life” and succumb to the pure “flow” of words and images.

Within the plays, there are similar moments that seem to strive to evade analysis—or to recommend that imagined interpreters refrain from analysis—which for me reinforces Steven Connor’s suspicion that “although Beckett has frequently indicated that he turned to the theatre

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<sup>15</sup> Beckett, *Company*, in *Company / Ill Seen Ill Said / Worstward Ho / Stirrings Still*, 3.

as [...] relief from the impasse that the writing of fiction had led him to,” his work for theater “is really [...] [a response] to the same impasse.”<sup>16</sup> There are many lapsed and aspiring authors, and there are equally many misguided readers and audiences in Beckett’s plays. The most obvious illustration occurs in *Eleutheria*, when a fictional “spectator” invades the stage and demands a coherent explanation of the meaning of the play (*El*, 126–53). Yet there are more oblique instances, as well, in which characters relate to one another or to an imagined audience in ways that seem to mirror the relationship between Beckett and his critics. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon calls Vladimir a “critic,” an epithet presented as the insult to top all insults (*CDW*, 70). Winnie combines quotations in such a way that her own voice is difficult to distinguish from that of the works she quotes, offering little fodder for those who might wish to delve into traditional forms of character analysis. Krapp’s isolation and inability to sell his work—and indeed, the very elision of the full content of his “vision” from the play—guarantees that it will never be interpreted. At the end of *What Where*, Bam calls out tauntingly to his imagined audience, “Make sense who may. I switch off” (*CDW*, 476). Bam assumes the role of playwright or director—he has dictated all of the events of the play—and his implication that there is no legitimate way to make sense of his work seems to convey Beckett’s own invitation to his audience to abandon a hermeneutic mindset.

Beckett’s interviews have encouraged these associations. Shenker claims that “Beckett speaks precisely like his characters” (147), and the instances of self-reflexiveness scattered throughout his work can appear to constitute coded forms of pre-emptive authorial intervention into an imagined reception that might grant too much weight to unintended resonances. While Beckett’s poetry has not shaped his reception nearly as decisively as his prose and drama have, it is worth mentioning that it too often suggests a defiance of intellectual reasoning. His early poem “Gnome,” for example, refers to the “loutishness of learning” in a way that derides a too-

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); hereafter cited parenthetically.

intellectual, presumably literary-critical mindset (*CP*, 55)—the most common reading of this poem is that it offers a comment on Beckett’s resignation from the French Department at Trinity College Dublin and his frustration with “the whole ethos of professional academic life.”<sup>17</sup> Beckett’s final poem “What is the Word” describes as “folly” the “need to seem to glimpse” an unnamed something that cannot be rendered intelligible, something for which no word seems to exist (*CP*, 228–29). This suggestion that there is nothing to say would seem to imply that there is nothing to interpret.

All of these snapshots—from the prose, the drama, and even the poetry—seem to indicate a consistent Beckettian attitude towards the activity of interpreting artistic expression, one detectable perhaps most directly in *The Unnamable*, with its insistence on the absolute baselessness of all its claims. As the narrator of that text apparently recognizes, however, the ambition to forestall interpretation indefinitely is fundamentally unfulfillable. This is particularly evident in the line from which my thesis title is drawn: “The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue” (*T*, 299). The voice that speaks here conceives of itself as trapped in a situation whereby even its own attempts at giving up render giving up impossible. An anticipated interlocutor, the imagined other half of an ever-continuing “discourse,” will always be ready with a response to its attempts to put an end, a stop, to speech without an end, a fixed goal. In a sense, *The Unnamable* anticipates and complicates its own reception by inviting a comparison between this interlocutor and its reader. It warns that imagined reader against willfully prolonging “the discourse,” against attempting to comprehend and respond to the novel in an intelligible way, even as it recognizes the necessary futility of that warning. For me, and I suspect for a number of Beckett’s readers, the voice of *The Unnamable* is a key Beckettian voice, or at least one in which a characteristically Beckettian resistance to

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<sup>17</sup> See Sam Slote’s short biography of Beckett written for the Trinity College website. Slote, “Samuel Beckett,” *Trinity Writers*, first published January 2016, <[tcd.ie/trinitywriters/writers/samuel-beckett](http://tcd.ie/trinitywriters/writers/samuel-beckett)>. See also Steven Connor’s argument that Beckett’s erudition is largely a myth. Connor, “Literature, Politics, and the Loutishness of Learning,” in *Beckett, Modernism, and the Material Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 152–75.



interpretation is articulated particularly forcefully and directly. Instead of addressing the novel at length, however, I opt in this thesis to weave analyses of particular moments from the novel throughout my chapters in order to demonstrate how the issues I raise complicate received ideas about Beckett's "terminal vision" and "terminal style."<sup>18</sup>

Of course, Beckett was neither the first nor the last modern writer to anticipate and attempt to steer the reception of his work away from a pursuit of interpretative resolution. To cite an obvious example, James Joyce, in *Finnegans Wake*, at times seems to tease imagined readers who would search for stable meaning within the text.<sup>19</sup> Outside his work, as well, Joyce intervened in clownish ways into the reception of his own novels, distributing differing schema for interpreting *Ulysses* to Carlo Linati and Stuart Gilbert.<sup>20</sup> What seems to set Beckett apart from a writer such as Joyce, however, is the extremity to which this resistance to interpretation is taken. Rather than allowing his voice to multiply into a cacophony of equally tenable possibilities or viewpoints, Beckett is generally seen to focus on ending and silence, on timelessness and placelessness, themes that Boxall notes have come to constitute the defining features of Beckett's signature style.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This is Alfred Alvarez's famous assessment of the "trilogy" comprised of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, and it carries the implication that it is in *The Unnamable* that this "terminal vision" achieves its ultimate form. Alvarez, *Beckett*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1973; London: Fontana Press, 1992), 54.

<sup>19</sup> This, for example, is Connor's interpretation of one of the final lines of "Anna Livia Plurabelle"—"Latin me that, my trinity scholar"—which Connor (among others) argues is directed at Beckett, himself. Connor, "Literature, Politics, and the Loutishness of Learning," 154. See also James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (1939; London: Penguin, 1992), 201.

<sup>20</sup> See Tim Conley, introduction to *Joyce's Disciples Disciplined: A Re-Examination of the "Examination of Work in Progress"*, ed. Conley (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2010), i–xx.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (New York: Continuum, 2009); hereafter cited parenthetically.

## Beckett's Work and the Remit of Hermeneutics

For the past sixty years, the mismatch between the growing popularity of Beckett's work and his keen emphasis on themes such as reduction and failure has served as a jumping-off point or as a readymade case-in-point for a number of theoretical and philosophical critiques of traditional modes of understanding artistic expression. Susan Sontag, for example, laments that Beckett's oeuvre "has attracted interpreters like leeches" with the result that "Beckett's delicate dramas of the withdrawn consciousness," dramas putatively "pared down to essentials, cut off, often represented as physically immobilized," are seen as "a statement about modern man's alienation from meaning or from God, or as an allegory of psychopathology": "In place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art," she claims.<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, in his reflection on Roland Barthes's notion of the "death of the author," begins with a quotation from Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*: "What does it matter who is speaking?; someone said; 'what does it matter who is speaking.'" Foucault claims that this quotation reflects an indifference fundamental to contemporary writing, one suggesting that texts ought to be organized and read with reference to particular discourses rather than with reference to their authors and what they are ostensibly trying to say.<sup>23</sup> Theodor Adorno's essay on *Endgame* argues that Beckett's play demonstrates the importance of resisting dubious interpretative schemes designed to make history serve unsavory political ends.<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, in an off-the-cuff response to the question of why he never wrote on Beckett, made the

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<sup>22</sup> Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (1961; London: Penguin, 2009), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," trans. Josué V. Harari, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rainbow (1969; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd, 1984), 101–20. Dirk Van Hulle points out that Foucault slightly misquotes and perhaps misinterprets Beckett's line: "What Foucault interprets as indifference seems to have been the object of a permanent internal struggle throughout Beckett's career as a writer." Van Hulle, *Manuscript Genetics, Joyce's Know-How, Beckett's Nobow* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 144.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," trans. Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique* 26 (1961; Spring–Summer 1982): 119–50; hereafter cited parenthetically.

now-famous response that he felt “too close” to Beckett, suggesting that Beckett had an unstated influence on his thought.<sup>25</sup>

These examples amount to little more than a whistle-stop tour through a number of complicated issues, and in many cases Beckett’s work seems to serve merely an incidental or illustrative role. Yet the bare fact that Beckett’s name recurs in such diverse theoretical reflections ought to demonstrate the importance of his work to postwar interrogations of the aims and remit of interpretation. At the heart of this link is a seminal reflection on *L’Innommable* by Maurice Blanchot, whose works find affiliations with those of many if not all of the commentators mentioned above and whose thought now reverberates throughout Beckett studies.<sup>26</sup> Blanchot formulates the problem of interpreting Beckett in this way:

Who is speaking in the books of Samuel Beckett? What is this tireless “I” that seemingly always says the same thing? Where does it hope to come? [*sic*] What does the author, who must be somewhere, hope for? What do we hope for, when we read? [...] By a reassuring convention, we answer: it is Samuel Beckett. [...] [But] the one writing is already no longer Beckett but the demand that led him outside of himself [...] [to] the empty place in which the listlessness of an empty speech speaks.<sup>27</sup>

Blanchot is principally concerned with the problems that Beckett’s novels—and particularly *The Unnamable*—pose to what he presumes to be the traditional aim of reading: namely, a recovery of authorial intentions. This concern proves instructive for understanding the later comments of Sontag, Foucault, Adorno, and Derrida, for whom Beckett’s works self-consciously demonstrate

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1991), 60.

<sup>26</sup> Blanchot’s reflection launches Critchley’s treatment of Beckett, for example, in which Critchley follows Blanchot’s analysis of *L’Innommable* to re-explore the question, “Who speaks in the work of Samuel Beckett?” a question that Critchley describes as “an (perhaps *the*) enigma” (172).

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (1959; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 210–13.

the lack of control that authors have over the meaning of what they write. Directly or indirectly, each takes issue with Heideggerian metaphors of surface and depth, whereby a surface content is presumed to be a mere index of a deeper or hidden meaning.

Scholarship examining the resonances between such arguments and Beckett's own sentiments continues to grow, encouraged by the release of new texts and letters. Beckett's first novel and play, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *Eleutheria*, were only published posthumously in the 1990s, but they engage more clearly and directly in self-reflexive commentary on their own resistance to interpretation than better-known works published much earlier, such as *Murphy* and *Waiting for Godot*. Similarly, the 2011 publication of the second volume of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* has made widely available a 1954 letter that seems to reinforce the importance already granted to Blanchot's essay on *The Unnamable*. Beckett writes to Peter Suhrkamp that this was his most highly esteemed critical response to the novel, referring to it as "la chose capitale" (LII, 441).

Over the past thirty years, studies of Beckett's work have tended to invoke arguments by philosophers and theorists such as Blanchot and Derrida in a way that emphasizes the themes of reduction and constriction of authorial power, themes thought to undermine the legitimacy of the search for stable meanings, messages, or lessons in Beckett's writing. One of the earliest examples of this approach can be found in a study by Thomas Trezise, which along with roughly contemporaneous studies by Connor and Leslie Hill purported to enact "a major re-interpretation of Beckett in light of Freud and such post-modernists as Bataille, Blanchot, and Derrida."<sup>28</sup> In the following, Trezise explicitly follows the logic of Blanchot's *L'Espace littéraire*:

The "ex-" of "ex-pression" clearly denotes [...] an exteriority or outside the originary separation from which constitutes the interiority of the subject or the subject *as*

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Trezise, *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), dustjacket; hereafter cited parenthetically. See also Connor and Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); hereafter cited parenthetically.

interiority. From Descartes to Husserl and Sartre, subjectivity has indeed been conceived precisely as this separation. (8)

Buttressing the relevance of his approach with quotations from Beckett's critical writings that make similar points, Trezise claims to follow Beckett in rejecting the possibility that expression, in the sense of something literally pushed from inside to outside, can ever convey an authorial intention accurately, since in order to do so "it requires the mediation of irreducibly sensible signs" (12). Borrowing from Derrida, Trezise writes that expression can only be truly grasped "in a language without communication [...] in the completely muted voice of 'solitary mental life'"—in which case, of course, the very term "expression" is inappropriate.

The implication is that this problem of inexpressibility renders any search for coherent concepts in Beckett's work fundamentally problematic. Similar principles underlie Connor's and Hill's arguments. For Connor, Beckett's writing disrupts the boundaries of the concepts of original and repetition. Hill eschews any focus on coherent concepts at all and focuses instead on the affective dimensions of the text itself, an approach that seems to resonate with Sontag's call for an "erotics of art." While the self-designated poststructuralist turn in Beckett studies might now seem a bygone phenomenon, what remains is this tendency to focus on the very facets of the work that make coherent concepts difficult, or even impossible, to identify. Laura Salisbury, for example, has recently shown how the rhythms of Beckett's writing interrupt and even impair certain experiences of the passing of time.<sup>29</sup> Sinéad Mooney examines Beckett's odd syntactical structures to argue that the voices emerging from Beckett's texts seem always to be ventriloquized, obscuring any clear point of origin.<sup>30</sup> In *Late Modernist Style in Samuel Beckett and*

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<sup>29</sup> Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>30</sup> Sinéad Mooney, *A Tongue Not Mine: Beckett and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); hereafter cited parenthetically.

*Emmanuel Levinas*, Peter Fiffeld offers a detailed study of the uncontrolled nature of Beckett's creative process, claiming that the idea of inexpression is germane to Beckett's late modernism.

In my view, it is important and appropriate to focus on the inexpressive or non-propositional features of Beckett's writing, especially given all of those lines in his work in which author-characters speak of words coming to them without their volition. In such instances, expression is indeed represented less as a set of ideas pressed out and more as a hodgepodge of voices or "tones" observed, something akin to the random formation of patterns in a kaleidoscope. Perhaps the most forceful instances of this occur in *Cascando*, when Opener insists that the voices he hears do not originate within his own head, or more famously in *Not I*, in which Mouth refuses to take responsibility for her utterances. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that the very tendency of such characters to deny responsibility for what they express—rather than simply to pass over the matter of origin in silence—is in fact a tendency to insist on their own (non-)interpretations. The same might be said of Beckett's comments about his own ignorance regarding his work. When he says of *Waiting for Godot*, for example, "I know no more about this play than anyone who manages to read it attentively," he uses this claim of ignorance to discourage those searching for ever-deeper or more sophisticated forms of meaning that might be drawn from it (*LII*, 316).<sup>31</sup> Such pointed pre-emptive discouragement seems to suggest a tacit recognition that meaning is ultimately ineradicable from expression. Otherwise, it would be unnecessary to insist so keenly that audiences abandon the search for meaning.

Perhaps the pithiest articulation of why a deliberate resistance to interpretation is itself interpretable is put forth in Derrida's "Signature Event Context." Derrida points out that while meaning can never be fully fixed, it can also never be fully eradicated: "Every sign [...] can be *cited*, put between quotation marks, [...] engendering an infinity of new contexts" in which it can

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<sup>31</sup> Beckett wrote this statement to be read before a radio broadcast of *En attendant Godot*.

be interpreted, yet “this does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring [*ancrage*].”<sup>32</sup> Derrida drives the point home with an example, pointing out that the ostensible “meaninglessness” (*Sinnlosigkeit*) of Husserl’s sentence, “The green is either,” is nevertheless understandable “as an example of agrammaticality” (12). To further elucidate such ironies, this thesis draws on a number of similar theoretical works that highlight the inevitability of interpretation. Among these are Derrida’s *Spurs: On Nietzsche’s Styles*; Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*; Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction*; Barbara Herrnstein-Smith’s *Contingencies of Value*; Derek Attridge’s *The Work of Literature*, which I read alongside Charles Taylor’s “Self-Interpreting Animals”; and Lionel Abel’s *Metatheatre*.<sup>33</sup> The arguments put forth in works such as these can shed light on Beckett’s attempts to forestall interpretation insofar as they elucidate the futility of all attempts at a form of expression from which no meaning can be drawn. I draw upon them in my analyses of Beckett’s obsessive dialogue with an imagined rhetoric of interpretation, which as I show surfaces throughout his career, within both the fiction and the nonfiction, and at the levels of both content and form.

## Means and Ends in Context: Beckettian Strategies and Resonances

This thesis contributes to critical conversations around such apparent prescriptions against interpretation, conversations that constitute some of the few remaining threads by which Beckett

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 12; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *Spurs: On Nietzsche’s Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (1974; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” in Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45–76; Abel, *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 2003). Abel’s essay “Metatheatre,” which is collected in *Tragedy and Metatheater* alongside other essays, was originally published in 1963. All of these are hereafter cited parenthetically.

studies might continue to claim its singularity as a category. In aims and in methodology, it participates in an ongoing trend in Beckett studies, one outlined by Boxall in his contribution to the recent collection *Beckett and Nothing*:

A new set of possibilities for the articulation of Beckett's negativity [is] beginning to make [itself] felt. [...] This new period or phase [of Beckett's reception] [...] is one that is enabled by a growing awareness both of Beckett's debts and of his legacies, and one that is informed by a much stronger and deeper body of knowledge than was previously available both about the ways in which Beckett's thinking interacts with a number of traditions that he inherits, and about the ways in which those who come under his influence interact with the legacies that he passes on. (35)

What I do is similar in spirit to what Boxall describes here. I approach Beckett's negativity through figures and voices in the margins and at the center of Beckett's texts, looking at the playful self-reflexiveness that problematizes interpretations of the texts in which they appear, and I contextualize this facet of the work in relation to ideas and concepts developed by a number of Beckett's contemporaries. In addition to Joyce, Proust, and Havel, I chiefly consider André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, and Georges Bataille, as well as (more briefly) Luigi Pirandello, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Antonin Artaud. Such figures are already familiar to Beckett studies, but I introduce into my analyses lesser-known or lesser-analyzed materials relating to their thoughts on artistic expression and reception. This documentation and contextualization results in the finding that Beckett's extreme resistance to interpretation can itself be understood with reference to a (loose) genealogy of other writers' and artists' reflections on the vagaries of meaning. Beckett's attempts to forestall interpretative resolution are always conceivable, at the very least, as examples of deliberate, strategic attempts to encourage specific forms of reception in imagined readers and audiences.



Within Beckett's work, a resistance to interpretation can go hand in hand with a wish to invite a different reaction to artistic expression independent of enshrined ideas around meaning. This suggests that Beckett may have shared (for example) certain views about interpretation with T. S. Eliot, who comments in one of his Norton lectures:

The chief use of the "meaning" of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be (for here again I am speaking of some kinds of poetry and not all) to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him; much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog. [...] But the minds of all poets do not work that way; some of them, assuming there are other minds like their own, become impatient of this "meaning" which seems superfluous, and perceive possibilities of intensity through its elimination.<sup>34</sup>

Beckett, too, seems to view the tendency of audiences to search for interpretative resolution as an obstacle standing in the way of other possible modes of reception, as when he commented that he was "not unduly concerned" with the intelligibility of Mouth's speech in *Not I* and hoped that the torrent of speech would "work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect."<sup>35</sup> Many of the instances of coded authorial intervention peppered throughout his work might constitute attempts to deflect the potential interference of his audience's intellect in order to ensure that the work achieves the desired intensity through non-semantic means.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933; New York: Faber and Faber, 1964), 151. For a thorough examination of this strain in Eliot's thinking, see Ron Bush, "Intensity by Association: T. S. Eliot's Passionate Allusions," *Modernism/modernity* 20, no. 4 (November 2013): 709–27, esp. 713, where this quotation is analyzed.

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Beckett, letter to Jessica Tandy, quoted in Gontarski, "Revising Himself: Performance as Text in Samuel Beckett's Theatre," *Journal of Modern Literature* 22, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 146, n. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Other scholars make similar arguments about affect and meaning in Beckett's work, but without exploring similarities between Beckett's apparent ambitions and those of contemporaneous writers. Salisbury writes that the rhythms of Beckett's prose seek to "materialise as affect the sensation of time passing" (2). Amanda M. Dennis argues that "glitches in logic" in *Watt* "initiate a sensual poetics whereby sound-textures come to rival common sense." Such thinking chimes with recent work on affect beyond Beckett studies. It reinforces the premise of Julie Taylor's recent edited collection on modernism and affect: namely, that many modernist writers were deeply interested in feelings and sensations, particularly in light of the new, extreme feelings and sensations of the modern

In order to demonstrate the wide applicability of my claim that Beckett's works are driven as much by a recognition of the inevitability of interpretation as they are by the desire to subvert interpretation, I compare texts from different periods and different genres. My first and third chapters offer new readings of two particular moments in Beckett's career that tend to be used in Beckett studies to define notions of Beckett's aesthetics or artistic vision. These are the interwar period, during which Beckett wrote much criticism, and the immediate postwar period, that of the famous "siege in the room." Both chapters make a case for reading Beckett's nonfiction as fictional in its own right. The second and fourth chapters combine texts from different periods in Beckett's career and challenge the widely accepted notion that the later works are somehow different in kind from those composed before Beckett's vision at his mother's bedside.

In the first chapter, I show how Breton's automatic method, Proust's descriptions of his own composition method (as described in a 1913 interview in *Le Temps*), and Joyce's "séance" method of translating *Work in Progress* into French all find resonances in the concerns raised in Beckett's critical essays of the 1930s. I find these to be made up of a series of appropriations, misappropriations, and rehearsed phrases deployed in a way that demonstrates the claims they make about the limits of literary criticism. I discuss these essays as fictional in their own right: the multiple voices within them de-center the opinions expressed, rendering them "experimental and not demonstrative" in the same way that Beckett claimed Proust's "explanations" are (*PTD*, 87). In that sense, I argue that Beckett's critical voices chime with what he once described as his "bits of pipe," those remembered quotations incorporated into works such as *Happy Days* more for their rhetorical force of expression than for their actual semantic content.

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period. Perhaps most interestingly, it also resonates with recent work within affect theory. It calls to mind ideas put forth by Brian Massumi, in whose work "intensity is equated with affect," and for whom "intensity is the unassimilable": "Affect is unqualified. [...] It is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique." Dennis, "Glitches in Logic in Beckett's *Watt*: Toward a Sensory Poetics," *Journal of Modern Literature* 38, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 103–16. Taylor, ed., *Modernism and Affect* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 27–28.

In the second chapter, I investigate how Tzara's and Duchamp's representations of the creative process and strategies of self-presentation resonate with similar representations and strategies in Beckett's work and interventions into interpretations of his work. Paying particular attention to deliberately vague or inconsistent metaphors within texts such as Tzara's "Dada Manifesto 1918," pieces included in the periodical *The Blind Man*, and Duchamp's *Green Box*, and comparing these with vague or inconsistent metaphors concerning authority and coherence in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *Endgame*, I argue that many of Beckett's interventions into his own reception, like those of Tzara and Duchamp, are understandable as deliberately incoherent statements designed to complicate the notion of artistic control. These comparisons are particularly interesting because Tzara and Duchamp, like Beckett, were little-known experimental artists who eventually became mainstream figures, which means that received understandings of some of the most bewildering features of their work have largely been shaped with reference to their own statements on artistic expression and reception.

In the third chapter, I consider the affinities between Bataille's notion of expenditure and the themes of value and valuelessness that become salient in Beckett's postwar writing. Taking my cue from the militaristic and economic terms in which the "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit" couch their rejection of the principle of mimesis, I look at the rhetoric of transaction that dominates another of Beckett's postwar writings on art, his "La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon." Like Beckett's interwar criticism and his interventions into the reception of his work, this essay and the "Three Dialogues" are seen to straddle the line between criticism and fiction. Both pieces use vague and illogical formulations to imagine impossibly self-contradictory values in artistic expression, values utterly un-representable in the terms of classical economic metaphor and yielding no benefits either to scholarly or to more pleasure-driven approaches. These essays find affiliations with self-reflexive lines in *Molloy* and *Waiting for Godot*, lines that similarly straddle the divide between fiction and analysis and that also cast aspersions

upon an imagined audience's attempt to find value in the work. Drawing on such lines and on comments Beckett made elsewhere, I argue that repetitions in both of these works can be conceived as instances of non-productive expenditure in Bataille's sense. They can be read as mere wastes of words and energy designed to deflect close scrutiny, even to bore an audience. The impossible goal, I argue, is to evoke an entirely negative experience devoid of all propositional content.

In the fourth chapter, I show how the protagonists of *Eleutheria* and *Catastrophe* find themselves in a situation where even their silence and inaction will always be interpreted by others in accordance with existing social conventions. I explore how this situation finds affiliations with a similar situation toyed with at a metatheatrical level: namely, one in which Beckett's scripts will always be staged according to the specific expectations of directors and audiences. *Catastrophe*, which was written for a "Night for Václav Havel" put on in Avignon by the *Association Internationale de Défense des Artistes*, resonates with Havel's own concerns about how his political dissidence in Czechoslovakia had led to him being portrayed in the West as a symbol of the moral superiority of liberal capitalist values. *Eleutheria*, tailoring its techniques for an audience with still-fresh memories of the Second World War, responds to metatheatrical techniques pioneered after the First World War in a way that bemoans how even wildly experimental plays such as Artaud's *The Spurt of Blood*, Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias*, and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* could be shorn of their subversive qualities and accommodated within existing theatrical conventions. Such toying with the relationship between written script, evolving theatrical conventions, and performed play might imply that Beckett is parodying the way in which directors might adapt his own scripts, but it could equally imply that performances of Beckett's plays would do well to remain sensitive and responsive to changing audience expectations, if only in order to subvert them.

The primary aim of this thesis is not to take sides on such matters. Rather, in accordance with the extreme complexity that the concept of interpretation takes on in Beckett's work, it merely calls for greater caution around episodes in which Beckett's works have been read and performed creatively. Its primary focus remains on the works themselves, examining the readers and audiences they imagine, tracing the impossible forms of un-interpretable expression they repeatedly try and fail to conceive of, considering the different means they employ to attempt to force a way through such impasses, and showing how all of this resonates with contemporaneous debates about artistic expression and reception. Nowhere are such issues foregrounded and wrestled with more explicitly than in the early critical essays, so I begin there.

## CHAPTER 1

### De-centered Manifestoes: Drifting Voices in the Interwar Criticism

The letters and critical essays that Beckett wrote during the interwar period are replete with bold, sweeping statements about the nature of aesthetic expression and experience that seem to resonate strongly with certain aspects of his creative work. The claim in “Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce” (1929) that “form is content” certainly seems applicable to the almost completely un-paragraphed text of *The Unnamable*, where a lack of discernible form seems to convey a lack of meaningful content (*Ex*, 3). The often-quoted line from *Proust* (1931), “Habit is the chain that ties the dog to its vomit,” finds an echo in Estragon and Vladimir’s daily routines in *Waiting for Godot*, the significance of which Vladimir seems to summarize in his line, “Habit is a great deadener” (*PTD*, 19; *CDW*, 84). The discussion in “Recent Irish Poetry” of “the rupture of the lines of communication” between subject and object seems to describe precisely the predicament of the voice in “What is the Word” (*D*, 70). The claim in Beckett’s now-famous 1937 “German letter” to Axel Kaun that “language is a veil [...] that must be torn asunder” seems to anticipate the lists of *Watt*, which appear to demonstrate only the semantic hollowness of linguistic systems (*LI*, 518). These resonances might account for the long-established tradition of treating the letters and essays as useful lenses through which to understand larger swathes of his canon as a

whole. Although Beckett's pronouncements are often oblique, they can nevertheless provide starting points from which to approach an oeuvre that offers little in the way of interpretative orientation. This chapter investigates how the early critical essays deploy arguments and turns of phrase borrowed from other writers and rehearsed in notes and letters, and it considers what this recycling means for critical discussions of how they bear on Beckett's fictional work.

"Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce" and *Proust* represent Beckett's two most substantial early critical essays, and it is perhaps for this reason that they have acquired a special significance in Beckett studies. This attribution of significance stretches back at least to 1970, when Lawrence Harvey described them in terms of Beckett's "apprenticeship and vision," suggesting that they laid the groundwork for later developments.<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Zurbrugg has since treated *Proust* as representative enough of a Beckettian mind-set to use it as evidence for his argument that Beckett's response to literary realism was identical to Proust's.<sup>38</sup> John Pilling has treated both essays as fundamental expressions of Beckett's "dissociative tendencies."<sup>39</sup> Manfred Milz has argued that the Joyce essay grapples with certain Bergsonian themes that would end up at the core of Beckett's early fiction.<sup>40</sup> Chris Ackerley has cited *Proust* as Beckett's first encounter with concepts that would become essential to an aesthetic that he would later explore in *Watt*.<sup>41</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté has argued that certain passages of the Joyce essay "could be read [...] as containing the seeds of Beckett's later evolution, from mimetic admiration of Joyce's control [...] to the 'heresy' of choosing the opposite path."<sup>42</sup> The list could go on, but this handful of

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<sup>37</sup> Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

<sup>38</sup> Nicholas Zurbrugg, *Beckett and Proust* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1988).

<sup>39</sup> John Pilling, *Beckett before Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12–37; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>40</sup> Manfred Milz, "Echoes of Bergsonian Vitalism in Samuel Beckett's Early Works," *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui* 19 (2006): 143–154.

<sup>41</sup> Chris Ackerley, "The Ideal Real: A Frustrated Impulse in Samuel Beckett's Writing," *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui* 21 (2009): 59–72.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Dangerous Identifications, or Beckett's Italian Hoagie," in *Joyce's Disciples Disciplined*, 4.

examples gives some feeling for the wide diversity of insights about Beckett's later work to which the ideas contained in the essays on Joyce and Proust have led. Accordingly, this chapter focuses primarily on those two texts in an attempt to contribute to these rich discussions, but it also considers other early criticism and correspondence, including "Recent Irish Poetry," the "German letter," and the parodic lecture "Le Concentrisme."

For present purposes, a particularly relevant reading in which Beckett's early criticism is treated as a lens for his creative work occurs in Sinéad Mooney's *A Tongue Not Mine*. Mooney refers to *Proust's* discussion of Proustian habit, claiming that it "of course has less to do with Proust than it does with an initial sketch of the coordinates of Beckett's own aesthetic," a claim that she buttresses with an analysis of the "German letter," which she describes as a "well-known Beckettian manifesto" (5). Yet Mooney—like the other scholars listed above—is cautious about granting too much weight to the ideas contained in *Proust*, her circumspection apparently owing largely to the convoluted logic, imagery, and rhetoric Beckett uses in *Proust* and elsewhere. The task of interpreting the essay proves to be the task of navigating a middle ground between literary criticism and fiction: Mooney concludes that "conceptions of Proustian habit develop a metaphorical proximity to a 'word' which is itself a screen sparing the individual the 'spectacle of reality,'" a conclusion that rests on an approach to Beckett's essay both as a straightforward critique and as a suggestive set of imagery and metaphor that lends itself to creative interpretation (5; Mooney quotes *PTD*, 10).

One way of addressing the presence of metaphorical and rhetorical devices in an ostensible work of nonfiction might be to describe them as Beckett's own overcompensation for the insecurities he felt while writing the essay, which he composed under heavy time pressure.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Beckett was obliged to complete the essay over a single summer. In June 1930, Thomas MacGreevy suggested to Richard Aldington that Beckett compose a long essay on Proust for Chatto and Windus; Beckett could not have been aware of Chatto and Windus's interest until after 20 June 1930, and he would ultimately submit a more or less final manuscript to Charles Prentice on 17 September 1930. See Charles Prentice, letter to Richard Aldington, 20 June 1930, cited in *LI*, 29. See also Samuel Beckett, letter to MacGreevy, 17 September 1930, cited in *LII*, 48.



Approximately one month before his deadline, for example, Beckett wrote to Thomas MacGreevy of his overall pessimism concerning the project, despite having found some hope in “a torrent of ideas or phrases” that came to him as he lay in bed (*LI*, 40–41). Based on this and other similar expressions of frustration, insecurity, and midnight bravado in Beckett’s letters, an argument could be made that the burden of articulating a rigorous, coherent argument becomes too much for Beckett, so he turns to rhetorical bluff and bluster to distract from his consternation at the difficulty of the task. The same argument could possibly be drawn from the fact that, in several places in *Proust*, Beckett seems only to repeat certain lines of the *Recherche* without citing them.<sup>44</sup> On the same note, it might be observed that the lines of inquiry pursued in “Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce” are more or less only those dictated to Beckett by Joyce himself, which could suggest equally cynical conclusions.<sup>45</sup> The familiar understanding of the young Beckett as a plucky upstart, it seems, could be replaced by an image of him as an overly stressed, perhaps somewhat desperate copycat.

That argument might have some corrective merit, but there is a more plausible middle ground between these two positions, one of which grants too much weight to the ideas sketched in Beckett’s essays, and the other of which dismisses them too flippantly as mere juvenilia. Frustration may go a long way towards explaining Beckett’s rhetorical maneuvers and his invocation of other writers’ voices, but that frustration might arise from Beckett’s recognition that the ideal form of literary expression he was trying to outline was an impossible one to describe due to its very nature. As I adduce below, in *Proust*, the Joyce essay, and other contemporaneous critical pieces, a vague concept of properly literary expression is repeatedly outlined impressionistically as a force that exists outside both author and reader. As Beckett puts

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<sup>44</sup> Leslie Hill provides a partial list of such instances (165).

<sup>45</sup> Late in life Beckett would claim that Joyce “found Bruno rather neglected” in this essay, and Beckett would explain that neglect with the claim, “They [Vico and Bruno] were new figures to me at the time. I hadn’t read them” (quoted in Knowlson, 100).

it in his analysis of Joyce, it is a “direct expression” that can only be “receive[d]” (*Ex*, 13). It is a reality that in a sense speaks through both author and reader without in any way speaking to them, or to borrow Mooney’s comparison, it is imagined to reduce both author and reader to “what André Breton, in Beckett’s *This Quarter* translation, calls ‘the silent receptacle of many echoes’” (6).<sup>46</sup> The irony inherent in this model is that literature is expected to reveal a deeper reality by means of the very words that obscure it. The task of understanding or elucidating whether a particular work achieves this impossible feat, which Beckett’s interwar criticism seems to present as the primary task of the critic, itself becomes an impossible one, since its main criterion is undefinable by its very nature. Mooney’s comparison with Breton proves instructive, for as this chapter shows, the paradox that Beckett revolves around is one that he consistently, if only obliquely and in various forms, identifies within critical positions implicit in the reflections and methods of Proust, the French Surrealists, Joyce, and the Joyce circle.

Viewed in this light, the extremities of tone in the early critical essays, which often take the form of insults to imagined readers, can be conceived as attempts to goad readers into overlooking the manifest impossibility of the idealized form of artistic expression the essays imagine. Those very attempts at goading, however, still suggest an oblique explanation of the special power of literature, which might be why many of these pieces—and *Proust* and “Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce” in particular—appear at times to be comprised largely of phrases imported from notebooks and letters and lifted from the very texts that are ostensibly being analyzed. The essays seem to piece together multiple voices, and as such they seem to have their own literary ambitions to reduce their own author and readers to silent receptacles of various echoes.

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<sup>46</sup> Mooney cites the special Surrealist issue, *This Quarter* 5, no. 1 (September 1932): 18.

## Explaining the Inexplicable

S. E. Gontarski has recently demonstrated the continuing importance of the idea that the concept of the “ideal real” described in *Proust*—“not an abstraction of a perception or the experienced thing, but [...] a real system of differential relations that creates actual spaces, times and sensations”—is what Beckett’s fictional work strives to evoke through its own “substitution of affect for intelligence.”<sup>47</sup> In claiming that the wild swings of tone in the early critical essays are aimed at the nerves rather than the intellect of readers, I am essentially arguing for the importance of reading these pieces primarily for their own attempts to substitute “affectivity for intelligence” (*PTD*, 81). This argument is admittedly somewhat self-contradictory, as it draws on an idea developed within *Proust* in order to argue that the ideas contained within *Proust* are of less interest than the terms in which they are articulated. Yet that contradiction seems only an echo of a contradiction that underlies *Proust’s* approach to the *Recherche*, which (according to Beckett) both functions independently of the realm of intelligence and yet suggests a number of ideas by which that functioning might be explained. This is the sort of contradiction that consistently comes to the fore in Beckett’s dealings with the works of Proust, the Surrealists, and Joyce, and it is one that he never quite finds a way around.

A 1932 letter to MacGreevy contains a particularly telling appropriation of Proust in a direct confrontation with this problem. Beckett reports that he finds his most recent poem to be “of little worth” because “it [does] not represent a necessity,” and he adds that he is “in mourning for [...] the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind” (*LI*, 133–35).<sup>48</sup> This last metaphor Beckett borrows from the final volume of the *Recherche*, which offers the following reflection:

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<sup>47</sup> Gontarski, “Towards a Minoritarian Criticism—The Questions we Ask,” introduction to *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Beckett refers to “Serena 1.” Cited in *LII*, 136.

I had always considered each one of us to be a sort of multiple organism or polyp [...] so that when a speck of dust passes it, the eye, an associated but independent organ, blinks without having received an order from the mind. [...] But I had also seen that these moral cells of which an individual is composed are more durable than the individual himself. [...] It seemed to me now that throughout the whole duration of time great cataclysmic waves lift up from the depths of the ages the same rages, the same sadnesses, the same heroisms, the same obsessions, through one superimposed generation after another.<sup>49</sup>

Proust's narrator interrogates the concept of the individual, first by imagining it fragmented into multiple constituent parts, then by imagining it subsumed within a greater whole. In his letter, Beckett uses Proust's image of the eyelid to depict artistic expression as something operating independently of the individual intellect, and presumably Proust's "great cataclysmic waves" could be used to a similar end. Yet Beckett's very appropriation of Proust's imagery is proof that even the ideal poem that he envisions is connected to the intellect. Its mode of composition is premised on a certain understanding of the individual, and it is understandable in metaphorical terms.

A similar problem is apparent within Proust's own thoughts on *Du Côté de chez Swann*, the first volume of the *Recherche*. In a 1913 interview with *Le Temps*, he argues that "the artist ought to seek the raw material of his work [...] only in involuntary memories" because "they liberate [sensation] from all contingency and they present us with its extratemporal essence, an essence

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<sup>49</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 6, *Time Regained*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terrence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 352–53. See also Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, bk. 8, vol. 2, *Le Temps retrouvé* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1927), 112–13.

which actually makes the content of a beautiful style.”<sup>50</sup> Yet Proust is careful to point out that *Swann* is not reducible to explanation:

I may well reason about my book in this way, [...] but it is not in any degree a work of reasoning; its slightest elements have been given to me by my sensibility. I perceived them first deep within me without understanding them and I had as much difficulty in converting them into something intelligible as if they had been as alien to the world of the intelligence as [...] a musical motif. [...] Such a thing shows at once in the style. Style is no mere embellishment. [...] It is, like colour for a painter, a quality of vision, the revelation of the particular universe each one of us sees.<sup>51</sup>

Proust’s claim that the style in which his book is written conveys something like “an extratemporal essence”—vague as it may be—implies that his work offers a point of contact between the intellect and that which is “alien to the world of intelligence.” The difference between Proust and Beckett is that Proust seems happy to let such paradoxical claims be, whereas for Beckett their internal contradictions suggest the impossibility of the ideal form of expression he imagines, which leads to a feeling akin to that of mourning.

Consider an instance in which Proust’s explanation of his work seems to be echoed in Beckett’s *Proust*: “For Proust, as for the painter, style is more a question of vision than technique” (*PTD*, 87–88). The narrator of the *Recherche* makes an almost identical comment, as

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Élie-Joseph Bois, “Élie-Joseph Bois and Proust’s Defence of *Swann*,” translator not named, in Susanna Lee, ed., *Swann’s Way* by Marcel Proust (New York: Norton, 2014), 403. Reprinted from *Marcel Proust: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Leighton Hodson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 82–85. Originally published in *Le Temps*, 13 November 1913.

<sup>51</sup> “Élie-Joseph Bois and Proust’s Defence of *Swann*,” 403. It is difficult to say whether Beckett was aware of this interview, although it is worth noting that in a letter to Charles Prentice, he writes that he would like to revise *Proust* in order to “separate Proust’s intuitivism from Bergson’s” (*LI*, 52), which echoes Proust’s comment in the interview in *Le Temps* that his distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory “not only does not appear in M. Bergson’s philosophy, but even is contradicted by it.” Presumably, the distinction that both have in mind is that Bergson allows that the intuition can be accessed voluntarily by “insert[ing] myself [into some external object] by an effort of imagination,” whereas for Proust this sort of experience can only be involuntary. “Élie-Joseph Bois and Proust’s Defence of *Swann*,” 403. Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (London: Macmillan, 1913), 2–3.

Shane Weller points out.<sup>52</sup> It is important to note that in *Proust* this is presented as a distorted or incomplete vision:

It will be necessary [for Proust] to interrupt (disfigure) the luminous projection of subject desire with the comic relief of features. It will be impossible to prepare the hundreds of masks that rightly belong to the objects of even his most disinterested scrutiny. He accepts regretfully the sacred ruler and compass of literary geometry. (*PTD*, 11–12)

*Proust* reiterates this conundrum when Beckett writes, “The artist has acquired his text: the artisan translates it. The duty and the task of a writer (not an artist, a writer) are those of a translator” (*PTD*, 84). The word “text” is used metaphorically to describe something analogous to “subject desire” as revealed to the artist through the intervention of involuntary memory. To express it in the form of a literal text is already to offer a translation, an interpretation, with all the (here unmentioned) possibilities of slippage and infidelity that ensue.

Similar problems surface in the critical writings of the French Surrealists. Beckett never wrote any sustained criticism on their work, but he translated their poetry, and their manifestoes provide useful counterpoints for Beckett’s own sweeping statements about the nature of an ideal form of expression. The first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924)—which was reissued in 1929, shortly after Beckett’s move to Paris in the autumn of 1928—contains Breton’s account of the genesis of the method of automatic composition, which is based on a type of involuntary, spasmodic poetic revelation similar to what Beckett attempts to describe in his appropriation of Proust’s metaphor of the eyelid. Breton recalls that as he was falling asleep one night, he “perceived [...] a rather strange phrase which [...] was something like: “There is a man cut in two by the window””; he writes that “all [he] could think of was to incorporate [the phrase] into [his] material for poetic construction” (23). Breton explains how he and Soupault, with “ease of execution,” would

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<sup>52</sup> See Shane Weller, *Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 60.

eventually deliver to each other “monologue[s] spoken as rapidly as possible” that they then transcribed for each other.<sup>53</sup> Artistic expression is conceived both as utterly divorced from the conscious intellect and as compatible with it. Even the “window” phrase, which Breton attributes to his subconscious, is to be consciously worked into his poetry, and the rapidly spoken monologues are equally presumed to be capable of conveying an eruption of subconscious energy in their conscious transcription.

Elsewhere, Breton reinforces the inevitable interpretability of poetic expression despite its putative distance from the world of understanding:

Lautréamont and Rimbaud never saw, or had *a priori* enjoyment of what they described, which is to say they were not describing, but were holed up in the gloomy darkness of the backstage of being, listening to the indistinct outline of accomplished, or accomplishable works, without understanding them any better as they wrote, than we do when we read them for the first time. “Illumination” comes *afterwards*.<sup>54</sup>

For Breton and other figures sympathetic with Surrealism, the inevitable mingling of “darkness” with “illumination,” of subconscious impulse with conscious interpretation, was not so much a conundrum as a portal to discovery. In his second manifesto, Breton would comment directly on his belief in the possibility of a quasi-mystical union of apparent opposites such as these: “There exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.”<sup>55</sup> Later still, Breton would work through the utopian implications of this belief, arguing that Surrealist expression possesses a “social use value” and serves to bring about the

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<sup>53</sup> Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), 23.

<sup>54</sup> André Breton, *The Automatic Message*, trans. Antony Melville, in *The Automatic Message, The Magnetic Fields, The Immaculate Conception*, trans. David Gascoyne, Antony Melville, and Jon Graham (1933; London: Atlas Press, 1997), 29.

<sup>55</sup> André Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 123.

“independence of thought which eventually triumphs [...] over human cowardice.”<sup>56</sup> Or as Eugene Jolas would put it when praising the authors who published in *transition*, a praise articulated in terms of explicitly Surrealist values, the best authors recognize that “the dream and the day-dream [are] functions of [their] subjective existence,” and they try “to bring [the dream and the day-dream] into a more definite relation with the phenomenal world” in order to “bring us liberation” from “pure reason.”<sup>57</sup>

Breton’s method was not wholly radical, however. Just as according to *Proust* even Proust was obliged to make certain concessions to literary convention, so Breton’s method of pure transcription still indicates some level of craftsmanship—for at the very least, it entails quasi-standard punctuations and spellings. This ineradicability of convention might be what Beckett picks up on in his translations of Breton’s poetry. As Pascale Sardin and Karine Germoni have pointed out, Beckett makes “systematic recourse to the forms *thee, thou, thine*” in order to “[impart] [...] an archaic flavor to the pieces,” a flavor suggesting that “if the unusual imagery originates in someone’s unbridled imagination, as is supposed to be the case in automatic writing, the syntax of the piece hardly comes out as being anarchic.”<sup>58</sup> The intellect intervenes in the moment of writing, and the same could be applied to the moment of reading, which according to Breton’s framework is tantamount to the same thing.

The inevitable explicability of aesthetic impulses is also apparent when Beckett quotes Paul Eluard—possibly his favorite Surrealist poet—in his “eyelids” letter to MacGreevy, a quotation that Beckett uses to attempt to describe his conception of an ideal poetry in another set of metaphorical terms:

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<sup>56</sup> André Breton, “The Relationship between Intellectual Work and Capital,” in *André Breton: What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), 90–92.

<sup>57</sup> Eugene Jolas, preface to *Transition Stories: Twenty-Three Stories from “transition,”* eds. Eugene Jolas and Robert Sage (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), ix–x.

<sup>58</sup> Pascale Sardin and Karine Germoni, “Scarcely Disfigured?: Beckett’s Surrealist Translations,” *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (November 2011): 745, 748.



Something arborescent or of the sky [...]; written above an abscess and not out of a cavity, a statement and not a description of heat in the spirit to compensate for pus in the spirit. Is not that what Eluard means?

Quel est le rôle de la racine?

Le désespoir a rompu tous ses liens. (*LI*, 134)<sup>59</sup>

This reading of Eluard resonates with what “Recent Irish Poetry” describes as a statement of “the rupture in the lines of communication” characteristic of the best modern poetry (*D*, 70), but in treating Eluard’s imagery as a metaphor for a coherent idea, it contrasts with the type of intuitive poetic reading that the metaphors of the “abscess” and the “statement [...] of heat in the spirit” recommend. Beckett provides quite a liberal, intellectualized interpretation, one that attributes an intended meaning to Eluard in order to argue (incoherently) for a divorce between the intellect and artistic expression.

Similar ironies surface within the Joyce circle. This, of course, had its own overlaps with Surrealism: Soupault was deeply active within both, and Jolas published extracts from *Work in Progress in transition*, where he also published translations of Surrealist works. Jolas’s own contribution to the *Exagmination* explicitly compares Joyce’s *Work in Progress* with the work of the Surrealists and with painting that “has done away with the classical perspective, [and] has tried more and more to attain the purity of abstract idealism, and thus [has] led us to a world of wondrous new spaces” (*Ex*, 82). He describes Joyce’s work in a way that shows little concern for logical contradiction:

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<sup>59</sup> The editors of Beckett’s *Letters* identify the source of this quotation as Eluard’s “*L’Invention*,” and they point out that Beckett would later translate these lines as, “What is the role of the root? / Despair has broken all his bonds” (*LI*, 137). See Paul Eluard, *Thorns of Thunder: Selected Poems*, trans. Samuel Beckett, Denis Devlin, David Gascoyne, Eugene Jolas, Man Ray, George Reavey, and Ruthven Todd, ed. George Reavey (London: Europa Press and Stanley Nott, 1936), 8. See also Paul Eluard, “*L’Invention*,” in Eluard, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Lucien Sheler (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 104–5.

James Joyce gives his words odors and sounds. In his super-temporal and super-spatial composition, language is being born anew before our eyes. [...] The human element across his words becomes the passive agent of some strange and inescapable destiny.

(*Ex*, 89)

The work is simultaneously art and craft, both inexplicable in terms of concrete meaning and yet explicable in terms of Joyce's control over its effects. This contradiction seems all the more apparent when Jolas's argument is read in conjunction with his attitude toward the "evolution of English":

Whether the organic evolution of speech is due to external conditions the people themselves bring about, or whether it is due to the forward-straining vision of a single mind, will always remain a moot question. I imagine there is an element of both working simultaneously at this process. (*Ex*, 82)

Jolas seems unconcerned by such moot questions, treating them as practically necessary and of relatively minor importance.

A similarly unconcerned attitude toward such apparent contradictions is detectible in the "séances" that Joyce held with Soupault, Jolas, Paul Léon, and Adrienne Monnier in order to complete Beckett and Alfred Péron's translation of "Anna Livia Plurabelle" into French. Richard Ellmann, drawing on Soupault's account, describes Joyce's "séances" as follows:

While Joyce smoked in an armchair, Léon read the English text, Soupault read the French, and Joyce or one of the others would break into the antiphony to ask a phrase to be reconsidered. Joyce then explained the ambiguities he had intended, and he or one of his collaborators dug up an equivalent.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce: New and Revised Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 632.

Aural patterns and spontaneity of diction are encouraged by the method of reading two texts aloud simultaneously, and in this sense, this method coheres with the idea that artistic expression is fundamentally an expression of something unrelated to individual intellect. Yet the author certainly has his place here, for Joyce's presence ensures that the translation will reflect only the ambiguities intended.

Many within the Joyce circle, then, seem to have been relatively unperturbed by the contradiction between a conception of artistic expression as an abstract force or feeling channeled through author and reader and a conception of artistic expression as something deliberately crafted and therefore intellectually accessible. Beckett's own essay on *Work in Progress*, however, suggests that this contradiction was of central concern for him. His opening rejection in "Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce" of Giambattista Vico's "complete identification between the philosophical abstraction and the empirical illustration," of "annulling the absolutism of each conception—hoisting the real unjustifiably clear of its dimensional limits," obliquely mirrors the necessary disconnect between the world of pure affect or feeling and that which can be expressed in intelligible terms. In a way, so do all of his juxtapositions of apparently mutually contradictory concepts in this essay, with mysticism and empiricism, "corruption and generation," "necessity" and "liberty," and most notably, with "the universal" and "the individual" (*Ex*, 4–7). Beckett's invocation of Giordano Bruno's idea that "the maxima and minima of particular contraries are one" might suggest Beckett's own faith in the possibility of a quasi-Surrealist union between the "universal" and the "individual"—a suggestion reinforced by his assertion that "individuality is the concretion of universality, and every individual action is at the same time superindividual" (*Ex*, 7). Yet his famous opening warning against the "neatness of identifications," combined with his self-deprecating attitude towards his "handful of abstractions" among which is the coincidence of contraries, suggests a reticence to grant these ideas real credence (*Ex*, 3).

This sort of hand-wringing suggests a particular reading of the conservatism of Beckett's initial translation of "Anna Livia Plurabelle" into French. The composition history of the final French text is complicated and diffuse, but Megan M. Quigley has shown that most of the differences between, on the one hand, Beckett and Péron's original attempt to translate "Plurabelle" into French under the working title "Anna Lyvia Pluratsel," and on the other hand, the corresponding section of the final, published French version under the title "Anna Livia Plurabelle," are attributable to Péron's handwritten, last-minute alterations to page proofs that ultimately went unpublished (including the title change). To Quigley, this evidence suggests that Joyce's séances were dedicated primarily to completing the translation rather than revising what had already been done. Beckett's letters indicate that the burden of the first draft fell largely to him, so it seems that the "Pluratsel" known to scholars can largely be attributed to Beckett alone (see *LJ*, 25, 31, 35).<sup>61</sup>

Beckett's text hews as closely as possible to a single, coherent semantic thread in its source text and takes few liberties with aural features. For example, where the English source text reads, "Temp untamed will hist for no man," the original translation reads, "*Le temps perdu ne se retrouve jamais.*"<sup>62</sup> This translated line reiterates the source text's basic message about the uncontrollable nature of time, but it neglects the aural playfulness of Joyce's Wakese. Beckett's conservatism here seems to suggest that the special power of Joyce's prose is untranslatable, and

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<sup>61</sup> Megan M. Quigley, "Justice for the 'Illstarred Punster': Samuel Beckett's and Alfred Péron's Revisions of 'Anna Lyvia Pluratsel,'" *James Joyce Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 473–74. For the "Pluratsel" known to scholars, see James Joyce, "Anna Lyvia Pluratsel (1930)," trans. Alfred Péron and Samuel Beckett, in *Anna Livia Plurabelle di James Joyce: nella traduzione di Samuel Beckett e altri; Versione italiana di James Joyce e Nino Frank*, ed. Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli (Torino: Guido Einaudi, 1996), 153–61. For the final French version of "Plurabelle," see James Joyce, "Anna Livie Plurabelle," trans. Samuel Beckett, Ivan Goll, Eugene Jolas, Paul Léon, Adrienne Monnier, Alfred Péron, Philippe Soupault, and James Joyce, *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 19, no. 212 (May 1931): 637–46. For the source text from which both of these versions were drawn, see James Joyce, "Anna Livia Plurabelle, Crosby Gaige, New York 1928," in Bollettieri Bosinelli, ed., *Anna Livia Plurabelle di James Joyce*, 1–28. For the final, published English version of "Anna Livia Plurabelle," see James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 196–201. For additional useful summaries of the composition history of the French "Plurabelle," see Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli, "Anna Livia Plurabelle's Sisters," and Daniel Ferrer and Jacques Aubert, "Anna Livia's French Bifurcations," both in *Transcultural Joyce*, ed. Karen R. Lawrence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), respectively 173–78 and 179–86.

<sup>62</sup> Joyce, "Anna Livia Plurabelle, Crosby Gaige, New York 1928," 4. Joyce, "Anna Lyvia Pluratsel (1930)," trans. Beckett, 155.

indeed, upon sending his translation to Soupault, Beckett would reiterate this sense of inevitable failure:

I would not wish to publish this, not even a fragment, without permission from Mr. Joyce himself, who might very well find it all really too badly done and too far from the original. The more I think of it, the more I find it all very poor stuff. Anyhow, such as it is, I send it to you. (*LI*, 39)

This humility may owe something to sheer politeness, however, and it does not necessarily imply that Beckett imbues Joyce with singular artistic mastery. Beckett's letters even hint that he considered Joyce's original text to be a sort of failed translation, itself. Unlike those present at the séances, for whom (according to Ellmann) Joyce's presence served an "authorising" function, Beckett would at times imply that Joyce himself had little control over an aesthetic impulse only hinted at, but never adequately expressed, in *Work in Progress*. Less than a month after the final French version of "Anna Livia Plurabelle" was published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, Beckett wrote to MacGreevy of its "futility," lamenting, "I can't believe that [Joyce] doesn't see through the translation himself, its horrible quip atmosphere & vulgarity, necessarily because you can't translate a motive" (*LI*, 78). Beckett acknowledges Joyce's own fallibility here, and insofar as the metaphor of a motive alludes to a sort of vitalistic impulse that cannot be pinned down, he implies that even Joyce's original text can only grope toward that which is ultimately inexpressible. Like Beckett's translation, the original "Plurabelle" expends a huge amount of craftsmanship and intellectual energy in an effort to translate into textual form a motion that for Beckett is utterly divorced from craftsmanship and individual intellectual effort.

Despite the misgivings expressed in his letters and hinted at in his critical essays, however, Beckett's essay on *Work in Progress* overwhelmingly characterizes Joyce's work as a success, not a failure, and the same is more or less true of Beckett's essay on Proust. This may owe something to the fact that, to borrow from Pilling, Beckett "wishe[d] to honour what he

[saw] it as his duty to do” (14). Through certain strategies of rhetoric, tone, and above all characterization, his criticism attempts to goad readers into accepting some impossibly laudatory claims for the work it addresses.

### **Rhetorical Bluff and Bluster**

Recent critical attention has been paid to the quasi-fictionality of the opinions expressed in “Recent Irish Poetry.” Emilie Morin focuses on the fact that the essay was published under the pseudonym Andrew Belis and argues that “Beckett [...] may have conceived the review as a coded, posthumous homage to Boris Nikolaevich Bugayev, known as Andrey Bely, [...] one of the founding fathers of Russian modernism.”<sup>63</sup> Taking a cue from Pilling, Mooney argues that it might be considered a “precipitate in prose” that could be “set beside the poetic precipitates of *Echo’s Bones* which appeared the following year.”<sup>64</sup> She points out that, when read this way, the poets whom the work addresses can be treated as equally fictionalized “characters” rather than as portraits of actual human beings: “The poets (or ‘puppets’) of whom [Beckett] writes never emerge as individuals in their own right, as he is far more interested in his responses to them” (36). This is especially true of the “antiquarians” or “twilighters” whom Beckett ridicules: “Beckett’s derisive rhetoric does not allow any of them to emerge from the fractured surface of his prose with any clarity” (37). For Mooney, this allows Beckett “to enact critically his own theme—that it is the ‘act’ and not the ‘object’ of perception that matters” (36). This approach, I think, is applicable to a wide swathe of Beckett’s interwar critical essays. The fact that Beckett expresses more doubts about Joyce and Proust in his letters than in “Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce” and *Proust* suggests that these essays, too, might contain some elements of fiction,

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<sup>63</sup> Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 31.

<sup>64</sup> Sinéad Mooney, “Kicking against the Thermolaters: Beckett’s ‘Recent Irish Poetry,’” *Samuel Beckett Today/ Anjourd’hui* 15 (2005): 30; hereafter cited parenthetically. See also Pilling, 123.

for the authors whose work they address are implausibly attributed with unique abilities to receive and channel artistic impulses without allowing their intellects to interfere with and distort them. I would also add that the derisive rhetoric contained in these essays is sometimes directed at imagined readers, and in combination with an exaggeratedly laudatory rhetoric regarding the artistic achievements of Joyce and Proust, it seems designed to force the impossible point that their work resists analysis altogether.

It is difficult to read “Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce” without an eye to its rhetorical aspects. Its wildly highfalutin rhetoric and obscure turns of phrase threaten constantly to disgust readers, to convince them that no work of literature could justify such logical and verbal acrobatics in a critical response. Ironically, even this rhetorical opacity can seem in line with the essay’s main aim to highlight the un-interpretability of Joyce’s work, since it has the propensity to undercut the expectation that anything at all will be explained. Likewise, it seems an effort to get around the fact that the very act of writing is necessarily an act of rendering intelligible when “Mr. Joyce” is associated with an almost superhuman ability to shut off his intellect. “Hermes is the prototype of the Egyptian inventor,” Beckett writes, “so for Romulus, the great law-giver, and Hercules, the Greek hero: so for Homer. Thus Vico asserts the spontaneity of language and denies the dualism of poetry and language” (*Ex*, 11). This claim is offered as a summary of Vico’s account of the origin of language, which Beckett represents as a primitive attempt at abstraction according to which a type (for example, “inventor”) is “designated” by the name of a “prototype” (for example, “Hermes”) (*Ex*, 11). Yet the claim also suggests that these legendary figures are prototypes of Joyce himself, and that *Work in Progress* is a “spontaneous” expression of a historical force that only passes through him, just as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* achieves a “mighty vindication of the vulgar” by channeling a linguistic register that he has done nothing to craft (*Ex*, 9). The comparison with the possibly apocryphal figure of Homer is especially

illuminating: like “Homer,” “Mr. Joyce” might be a more or less fictional construct standing in for a tradition or force beyond the agency of any individual.

Beckett’s insistence on Joyce’s unique abilities owes at least partially to an attitude common to those associated with the Joyce circle, many of whom similarly lauded Joyce’s work as a quasi-incarnation of history and language, and many of whom drew comparisons between Joyce, Vico, and Dante similar to those drawn by Beckett. Stuart Gilbert, for example, claims that “the subject of *Work in Progress* may easiest [*sic*] be grasped” through Vico, whose account of the origin of language Gilbert (like Beckett) uses as an explication of Joyce’s neologisms, and who (according to Gilbert) views history as “God’s work in progress,” a turn of phrase that implicitly grants Joyce godlike omnipotence over his work (*Ex*, 51–52). MacGreevy’s contribution to the *Examination*, by way of introducing the claim that it is “well known” that “the conception of [*Work in Progress*] as a whole is influenced by the *Purgatorio* and still more by the philosophy of Vico,” claims that Joyce “combines a wellnigh flawless sense of the significance of words with a power to construct on a scale scarcely equalled in English literature since the Renaissance” (*Ex*, 120). Besides echoing Beckett’s citation of Vico as well as Beckett’s comparison of Dante’s and Joyce’s “Purgatories” (*Ex*, 21), MacGreevy posits the notion of Joyce’s heroic agency (his “power to construct”). Where Beckett differs from these contributors, however, is in his praise of Joyce for a heroic ability to renounce the intellect. As in “Recent Irish Poetry,” this praise of one figure goes hand-in-hand with derision of another. When he writes that in Joyce “the mirror is not so convex” as it is in Vico (*Ex*, 13), he implicitly derides philosophical attempts to explain the world in logical or clear conceptual terms, attempts analogous to what he would later describe as attempts at “a ‘unification’ of the historical chaos.”<sup>65</sup> In this light, Beckett’s application of Vico’s concept that “every individual action is at

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<sup>65</sup> The “historical chaos” line occurs in an often-quoted passage from Beckett’s German diaries. On 15 January 1937, he writes, “I am not interested in a ‘unification’ of the historical chaos any more than I am in the ‘clarification’ of the individual chaos” (quoted in Knowlson, 244).



the same time superindividual” to Joyce’s work seems to imbue “Mr. Joyce” with the impossible ability to give voice to “superindividual” forces (*Ex*, 7).

Beckett grants a similarly impossible degree of passivity to the figure of Proust in his *Proust*. The foreword establishes from the start Proust’s almost mythical status: “There is no allusion in this book to the legendary life and death of Marcel Proust” (*PTD*, 9). At the same time, it anticipates the argument that as a person Proust is of little interest to critical study precisely because his work contains little or no trace of his biography. The disclaimer made in the foreword is of course contradicted throughout the essay, which finds itself obliged to mention Proust’s life because it is primarily dedicated to explaining a particular artistic method that arises from a particular form of memory. In an apparent attempt to resolve this contradiction, the essay implies that Proust is not really a subject with a memory at all. Beckett writes, “Proust had a bad memory—as he had an inefficient habit, because he had an inefficient habit” (*PTD*, 29). This innately bad memory is what allows Proust’s impressions to be “stored in that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of [his] being to which Habit does not possess the key” (*PTD*, 31). Ultimately, Proust “hoist[s] his world” from this “deep source” by the intervention of involuntary memory (*PTD*, 32, 35). Towards the end of the piece, Proust is described as “a pure subject, [...] almost exempt from impurity of the will,” and this condition leaves him more inherently prone to “artistic experience,” for “when the subject is exempt from the will the object is exempt from causality. [...] Human vegetation is purified in the transcendental apperception that can capture the Model, the Idea, the Thing in itself” (*PTD*, 90). Yet such an exemption is impossible even according to the conceptual framework of *Proust* itself, for Beckett also argues that “the world [is] a projection of the individual’s consciousness (an objectivation of the individual’s will, Schopenhauer would say)” (*PTD*, 19). If the world is an individual’s will, and Proust (as a stand-in for the ideal artist) has no will, then Proust ought to have no world to hoist.

Like Beckett's representation of "Mr. Joyce," this representation of Proust does not cohere with opinions that Beckett expressed in his correspondence. Beckett's exclamation, "I can't believe that [Joyce] doesn't see through the translation himself," implies that Beckett does not really imbue Joyce with the heroic status accorded him in the *Exagmination* essay, nor with the "superb" qualities that Shenker claims Beckett attributed to him (148). Beckett's opinion of Proust, too, seems to have been more mixed than he would publicly let on. In a 1929 letter to MacGreevy, Beckett complains,

I have read the first volume of "Du Côté de chez Swann" and find it strangely uneven. There are incomparable things [...] and then passages that are offensively fastidious, artificial and almost dishonest. It is hard to know what to think about him. [...] Some of his metaphors light up a whole page like a bright explosion, and others seem ground out in the dullest desperation. [...] And to think that I have to contemplate him at stool for 16 volumes! (*LI*, 11–12)

In *Proust*, however, there is little trace of such skepticism when Beckett addresses Proust's metaphors:

The rhetorical equivalent of the Proustian real is the chain-figure of the metaphor. It is a tiring style, but it does not tire the mind. The clarity of the phrase is cumulative and explosive. One's fatigue is a fatigue of the heart, a blood fatigue. One is exhausted and angry after an hour, submerged, dominated by the crest and break of metaphor after metaphor: but never stupefied. The complaint that it is an involved style, full of periphrasis, obscure and impossible to follow, has no foundation whatsoever. (*PTD*, 88)

In passages such as these, Beckett seems to be trying to convince himself of the greatness of Proust's work as much as he is trying to convince his readers of it.

Beckett's suppression of his misgivings in *Proust* may indeed owe something to what he saw as his duty. In a 1930 letter to Charles Prentice, who commissioned the essay, he mentions the "race of undershot Proustian lèche-fesses" who might be inclined to buy a "swagger edition" of his book, indicating that he recognized that his essay would appeal to those who held Proust in high esteem (*LI*, 52). More importantly, however, what the letter to Prentice highlights is that Beckett does not see it as his duty to write in praise of his imagined readers. Consider, for example, a key transition in *Proust*:

Albertine and the Proustian *Discours de la Méthode* having waited so long can wait a little longer, and the reader is cordially invited to omit [the following] summary analysis of what is perhaps the greatest passage that Proust ever wrote—*Les Intermittences du Cœur*.  
(*PTD*, 39)

Here a veiled insult to an imagined reader seems almost to attempt to tease that reader into adopting *Proust's* derisive attitude towards traditional objects of literary analysis such as plot and theme. "Albertine" here is shorthand for Albertine's seduction of Proust's narrator and her eventual death, one of the key plot developments of the *Recherche*, and "the Proustian *Discours de la Méthode*" alludes primarily to the final volume of Proust's work, *Time Regained*, which more or less explains, in quasi-philosophical terms, the artistic method according to which the previous volumes have been composed. The reader who would skip to Beckett's analysis of these would ignore what Beckett presents as the most essential aspects of the *Recherche* and thus would find little value in what is in fact (according to Beckett) its greatest passage.

Beckett's essay on Joyce contains more overt insults that seem designed to goad imagined readers into accepting the possibility of an ideal form of unintelligible expression. These can be traced when the essay turns from Vico to Joyce and switches from a logical "exposition" of Vico's philosophy to a more paradoxical and metaphorical method of addressing *Work in Progress*. That method is exemplified in lines such as, "form *is* content, content *is* form";

“When the sense is sleep, the words go to sleep”; and “You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all” (*Ex*, 14). This last line is nonsensical, but it seems forced through with an implicit insult to imagined readers, casting them perhaps as petulant children. That insult has already been articulated much more directly:

If you don't understand [*Work in Progress*], Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you are too decadent to receive it. You are not satisfied unless form is so strictly divorced from content that you can comprehend the one almost without bothering to read the other. This rapid skimming and absorption of the scant cream of sense is made possible by what I may call a continuous process of copious intellectual salivation. (*Ex*, 13)

The capitalized “Ladies and Gentlemen,” the reference to decadence, the implication that audiences are satisfied with “the scant cream of sense”: all of these serve an attempt to convey a critical attitude of disdain for what is presented as a common way of reading literature.

The reference to “salivation” is a pointed one. In her long essay *The Strange Necessity*, one of the most sustained criticisms of *Work in Progress*, Rebecca West likens the dual drives to create and consume literature to Ivan Pavlov's posited “‘What is it’ reflex, [...] which brings about the immediate response in man and animals to the slightest changes in the world around them.” She writes that while her “what is it” reflex eventually led her to appreciate *Ulysses*, it also led her to recognize the relative failure of *Work in Progress*.<sup>66</sup> West's criticism of Joyce is measured and respectful, but Beckett's caricature of West is relatively unforgiving:

When Miss Rebecca West clears her desk for a sorrowful deprecation of the Narcissistic element in Mr. Joyce by the purchase of 3 hats, one feels that she might very well wear her bib at all her intellectual banquets, or alternatively, assert a more noteworthy control

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<sup>66</sup> Rebecca West, *The Strange Necessity* (London and Toronto: Jonathan Cape, 1928), 74.

over her salivary glands than is possible for Monsieur Pavlo's [*sic*] unfortunate dogs. (*Ex*, 13)

Beckett's tone here seems aimed to eclipse the logical implications of the metaphor he borrows from West. The mention of "the purchase of 3 hats" refers to the opening anecdote of West's study, but here it seems to highlight what Beckett presents as the decadent or bourgeois quality of her own approach to literature. The irony of suggesting that she might control her salivary glands, of course, is that Beckett only reinforces West's point. Salivation is an automatic, uncontrollable reflex, and in the same way, the work of the intellect is itself a reflex, a necessity that cannot simply be avoided by an act of will. This is a realization that resurfaces throughout Beckett's oeuvre. Decades later, it would be acknowledged in *The Unnamable* when the narrator refers to a "deplorable mania, when something happens, to inquire what" (*T*, 296).

There is another problem in Beckett's essay, one implicit in the very nature of tone: namely, that it suggests a coherent authorial stance toward the material discussed. To try to force the point that *Work in Progress* can only be received passively is still to recommend a particular readerly attitude that can only be adopted consciously. It is to explain literature's special power and to offer a conceptual rubric by which a reader might make sense of it. Similarly, to insult the reader who would skip Proust's "greatest passage" is still to engage in value judgements, to offer a coherent set of conceptual criteria by which the power of the work might be understood logically. In a letter to MacGreevy from March 1931, Beckett seems to recognize that his own intellect is not totally absent from *Proust* when he complains, "It seem[s] like pale grey sandpaper; stab stab stab without any enchantment. [...] It has the plausibility of a pattern, a kind of flat syllogistic drift" (*LI*, 72). Yet Beckett also suggests a way this could be turned to his advantage when he writes, "At its best [it is] a distorted steam-rolled equivalent of some aspect or aspects of myself?" (*LI*, 72). Compare this with a letter Beckett wrote to MacGreevy a month earlier in praise of MacGreevy's monograph on T. S. Eliot: "The phrase-bombs are there [...], and

something better than that—phrase voltage” (*LI*, 64–65). The idea of phrases seemingly dropped out of the sky, or related less to the work analyzed and more to one another, could offer a way around articulating any coherent stance at all.

### **De-centering the Critical Voice**

In her analysis of the quasi-fictionality of “Recent Irish Poetry,” Mooney makes the following analysis of its wild unevenness:

[It offers a] savagely untidy, self-divided, dialogic non-narrative. [...] It resembles Bakhtin’s well-known concept of the “dialogic” text, refusing subjection, in either national or aesthetic terms, to a “finalising artistic vision,” destroying the “unified and integral fabric of narration” [...] and, above all, refusing to confirm a particular order of the world as being there, behind the language of the text.<sup>67</sup>

I would like to extend a similar line of argument to a wider selection of Beckett’s interwar essays and beyond, using metaphors such as “phrase-bombs” and “phrase voltage” to describe resonances between the textual mechanics of much of the interwar criticism and those of the more straightforwardly fictional work. In this respect, too, I borrow a concept from Mooney, who in her study of Beckett and translation writes of how a “‘trace’ of translation is left throughout Beckett’s work,” how “what is said, or heard, or repeated, appears to need to be interpreted or translated as if from an alien source [...] so that to speak, in Beckett, often appears to be the same as ventriloquizing the words of another” (2). This sense of ventriloquism, she argues, “disconcerts our reading and, significantly, *de-authorizes* it” (3). The idea of a text composed entirely of voices without definite origin certainly coheres with themes contained in

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<sup>67</sup> Mooney, “Kicking against the Thermolaters,” 41. Mooney cites Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 198, 14.

*The Unnamable*, for example, as evidenced when the narrator reflects, “They say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I who am speaking. Or I say they, speaking of God knows what, to make me think it is not I who am speaking” (*T*, 370). As I will show, in a number of the early critical essays, the voice of the critic can be difficult to distinguish from the voices of straw-men, quotations from the texts being analyzed, and ideas imported from other writers and critics. Many of the claims in these essays seem de-centered, without definite origin, and therefore not subject to traditional standards of critical accountability. The attitudes they adopt at times seem designed to be experienced uncritically, succumbed to as a sort of cacophony of echoes.

That reliance on borrowed voices suggests stylistic resonances between the critical essays and Beckett’s later work. In a 1972 letter to James Knowlson replying to questions about other quotations, Beckett offers another image for understanding his turns of phrase, one that chimes with his comments about the “torrent of ideas or phrases” that came to him in bed as he was composing *Proust*:

I simply know nothing of my work in this way, as little as a plumber of the history of hydraulics. [...] The “eye of the mind” in *Happy Days* does not *refer* to Yeats any more than the “revels” in *Endgame* (refer) to *The Tempest*. They are just bits of pipe I happen to have with me.<sup>68</sup>

Beckett is not claiming in this letter that he is unaware that the phrase “I call to the eye of the mind” is taken from Yeats’s work and “our revels now are ended” from Shakespeare, but rather that they are used simply for the pure force of their expression. The dialogue contained within plays such as *Endgame* and *Happy Days* can be conceived not as the working out of any thematic content, but rather as a cobbled-together series of abstract types of rhetorical effects, each analogous, perhaps, to a note or a chord in a piece of music. These bits of pipe also call to mind

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<sup>68</sup> James Knowlson, “Beckett’s ‘Bits of Pipe,’” in *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*, ed. Morris Beja, S. E. Gontarski, and Pierre Astier (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1983), 16. The parenthetical “refer” is presumably Knowlson’s.

the epigrams of the addenda section of *Watt*, or the wild allusions contained in Beckett's first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, few if any of which contain any reference to their sources within the work itself. It should be noted, however, that Beckett may be a bit disingenuous or overly sanguine about his own composition method. As the painstakingly well-documented quotations recorded in the *Dream* notebook indicate, he seems to have had the sources of his quotations in mind as he wrote, if not always at a conscious level.<sup>69</sup> Still, this letter suggests a (nearly impossible) manner of reading that might be applied to his criticism, as well.

*Proust* contains a model for this mode of analysis shortly after it seems to offer one of its most straightforward admissions of the contradiction inherent within its own conception of ideal literary expression. When Beckett writes, "Proust is positive only in so far as he affirms the value of intuition," he begrudgingly recognizes that even the purest form of expression will produce positively identifiable content, even if that only amounts to the statement that experiences of "the real" are inexplicable (*PTD*, 86). Yet shortly after *that* passage, Beckett offers a model by which he might disclaim that admission:

It may be objected that Proust does little else but explain his characters. But his explanations are experimental and not demonstrative. He explains them in order that they may appear as they are—inexplicable. He explains them away. (*PTD*, 87)

That is, Proust's explanations are merely speculative, and their refusal to move from speculation to committed claims, from experiment to demonstration, purportedly guarantees that what the *Recherche* expresses is a "non-logical statement" (*PTD*, 86). The same could be applied to Beckett's own claim here: it seems to offer a finalizing vision or explanation of an ideal art that appeals primarily to the intuition, but that explanation might itself be speculative, with that speculativeness designed to allow the *Recherche* to "appear as [it is]—inexplicable."

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<sup>69</sup> See John Pilling, ed., *Beckett's Dream Notebook* (Reading: University of Reading, 1999).



Beckett would later toy more explicitly with this sort of experimental criticism in his comic lecture “Le Concentrisme,” which makes judgements about Proust’s style that flatly contradict those of *Proust*. This lecture on the fictional artist Jean du Chas is itself delivered by a fictional voice, that of a beleaguered but dutiful scholar summarizing du Chas’s notebooks despite his lack of interest in the subject. It is unclear whether Beckett’s sympathies lie with du Chas, the lecturer, both, or neither.<sup>70</sup> In any case, a very negative take on Proust’s explanations is suggested when the lecturer quotes du Chas’s notebooks directly:

I have just read a letter by Proust [...] where he explains the reasons he cannot [...] blow his nose on Sunday morning before six o’clock [...]: “[S]o that I see myself as condemned, in consequence of that fatal chain of circumstances which goes back, doubtless, to some repressed Merovingian coryza, like Françoise who, at this very moment, huddled and invisible against the sound box of my door, leans over the fatal and delightful abyss of a titanic sneeze, to aspirate the torrents of mucus lava rising from the depths of my morning, Sabbatarian, volcanic snot and besieging the thrilling valves of my nostrils.” [...] That he cannot blow his nose on Sunday morning before six o’clock is a thing that seems natural enough to me. But after this torment of clarifications I understand nothing anymore. To hell with his explanations! (*D*, 41–42, my translation)

This mocking attitude certainly contradicts the opinion of Proust’s “chain-figure of the metaphor” given in *Proust*, and there are several other instances in which “Le Concentrisme” and *Proust* seem to pull against one another in their judgements on the *Recherche*. The criticism that remains only implicit in *Proust*’s reference to the *Discours de la Méthode* of the *Recherche*, for example, seems to be echoed but magnified in a reference to a *Discours de la Sortie* contained in

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<sup>70</sup> John Pilling describes the piece as a “spoof lecture” and says that its delivery to the Modern Languages Society at Trinity College Dublin in November 1930, “seems to have much amused the academic community.” Pilling, introduction to Samuel Beckett, “Le Concentrisme” and “Jean du Chas,” *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (November 2011): 881.

“Concentrisme.” As Ann Beer observes, the phrase “an art that is perfectly intelligible and perfectly inexplicable,” which occurs in *Proust* (PTD, 92), re-appears in “Le Concentrisme” as “cet art qui [...] est parfaitement intelligible et parfaitement inexplicable” (*D*, 42).<sup>71</sup> In the second instance, the phrase is used to describe du Chas’s art (as distinct from Proust’s). As Weller notes, the sentence, “Swann is the corner-stone of the entire structure,” which occurs in *Proust* (PTD, 34), is echoed in “Le Concentrisme” in the sentence, “Le concierge [...] est la pierre angulaire de mon édifice entier” (*D*, 36). Weller interprets this echo—convincingly, I think—as “a comic diminution not just of one of the most significant characters in Proust’s novel but of the novel in its entirety.”<sup>72</sup> It seems impossible to grant priority to the voice of *Proust* or the voice of “Le Concentrisme.” The opinions themselves seem off-balance, experimental and not demonstrative.

It is especially instructive to focus on the explicit fictionality of the voices of “Le Concentrisme.” None of the views “Le Concentrisme” expresses can be attributed to Beckett unproblematically, and indeed the humor shot through it suggests that to scrutinize its logic too closely is to miss the joke entirely. The piece is a fragment that contains several overlapping narrative frames, and its convoluted structure is clearly meant to convey a sense of confused enthusiasm similar to the logically opaque enthusiasm of du Chas’s short “manifesto” that the work quotes—that is to say, invents—in full. By doing just what its humor guards against, by scrutinizing the structure and logic of “Le Concentrisme,” it is possible to explain how the piece represents a deliberate travesty of critical language. Its medley of competing voices and chaotic contradictions seems to demonstrate the futility of criticism, to parody intellectual attempts to come to grips with what is essentially a joke. Jostling for attention are the voice of the writer of the opening letter, who recounts receiving the notebooks from du Chas, whom he refers to as an “imbecile” (*D*, 35); the more or less predominant voice of the scholar who receives these

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<sup>71</sup> Beer points this out in her “Beckett’s Bilingualism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 211.

<sup>72</sup> Weller, *Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity*, 61.

notebooks from the letter-writer and takes a comically serious interest in them; the voice of du Chas himself, as quoted by the letter writer (in a recount of meeting du Chas) and by the scholar (in the form of excerpts from du Chas's notebooks); and finally the voice of Proust, as read aloud by the scholar from the letter that du Chas quotes in his notebook (*D*, 42). None of these seems to have a definite origin. The writer of the letter remains anonymous; the scholar who delivers the lecture remains unnamed; the scholar suspects that Proust's letter might be entirely "fabricated" by du Chas; and of course du Chas himself is a fabrication. This overlap of multiple, fragmentary voices allows "Le Concentrisme" to make a case for the irreducibility of artistic expression through a spoof of the critical enterprise without claiming to articulate anything coherently.

This might be why the metaphor of concentric circles invoked by the title of du Chas's movement is destroyed in the instant that it is "understood": "The thing is explained. And the Chasian membrane yields before your paroxysms of cerebral pressure. Dispersion of concentrism" (*D*, 40). The multiple narrative frames of this lecture might be compared to multiple concentric circles, but since there is no fixed point at the center of any of these, understanding the narrative structure means dispersing the narrative structure, casting it more as series of tangents and interruptions based on no particular theme. The figure of concentric circles, then, seems less appropriate to the theme of "Le Concentrisme" than does the figure of the open- and close-parentheses side by side: (). Du Chas's most apparently inexplicable statements (and therefore his most apparently "artistic" expressions), such as "elephants are contagious," occur "in parentheses and in capital letters," and the recurrent references to Cartesian lenses, combined with references to du Chas as "the biconvex Buddha" and with the fact that the name "Chas" itself, invokes the "biconvex" shape of the eye of a needle, imply that

this oblong, de-centered shape might present a better visual model for the “perfectly inexplicable” art that the piece obliquely outlines (*D*, 38, my translation).<sup>73</sup>

*Proust*, too, contains a medley of voices. The dominant voice—the rough equivalent of the scholar in “Le Concentrisme”—seems to be that of Proust’s narrator. Hill even notes that Beckett’s point about the disfigured “luminous projection of subject desire” is itself an unacknowledged translation from the *Recherche*, which is appropriate since this is a key moment at which the essay acknowledges the impossibility of the ideal it sketches. By allowing that acknowledgement to be articulated through borrowed words, Beckett only takes half-responsibility for it, allowing the alternative—that the “luminous projection of subject desire” can indeed be expressed in an intelligible form—to remain viable. Hill also points out that part of Beckett’s account of the instance of involuntary memory in “Intermittencies of the Heart” is more or less lifted directly from Proust, and this too seems appropriate given that *Proust* presents that section as a prime instance of the particular power of the *Recherche*, something that according to Beckett’s model of artistic expression could only be reproduced and re-experienced, not commented on or paraphrased (*PTD*, 41–42). Perhaps most tellingly, one of the few times that Beckett does use quotation marks around a quotation from the *Recherche* is when he cites (translates) the line, “One only loves that which is not possessed, one only loves that in which one pursues the inaccessible,” a phrase that seems obliquely to reflect his own longing for an ideal form of artistic expression that would remain inaccessible to the intellect (*PTD*, 50). Beckett declines to “possess” this line by paraphrasing it.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Jean du Chas himself seems to have been an amalgam of several figures whom Beckett admired. The next chapter will point out some affinities between him and Marcel Duchamp, but here it is worth noting that the phrase “Les éléphants sont contagieux” is lifted from Eluard and Benjamin Péret’s “152 proverbes mis au goût du Jour.” See Péret, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: José Corti, 1995), 36. Originally published in 1925.

<sup>74</sup> All of these overlaps between the *Recherche* and *Proust* are listed in Hill, 165.

To this list, I would add that, when Beckett writes that “the exhortation to cultivate a Habit [has] as little sense as the exhortation to cultivate a coryza” (*PTD*, 20), his simile recalls one of Proust’s own:

[Mme des Laumes], not being in love [herself], [felt] that a clever man should only be unhappy about a person who is worth his while; which is rather like being astonished that anyone should condescend to die of cholera at the bidding of so insignificant a creature as the comma bacillus.<sup>75</sup>

Beckett borrows Proust’s analogy between love and illness, but replaces love with habit. Recall that in “Le Concentrisme,” the coryza (an inflammation of the mucus membrane in the nose) also makes an appearance, when Proust’s (fictional) letter refers to a “fatal chain of events dating, without a doubt, to some repressed Merovingian coryza.” The idea of using illness as a metaphor for the involuntary does not seem to carry with it any consistent tone from one instance to the next: it functions as a rhetorical “bit of pipe,” fitting in where it can.

There are other voices in *Proust* that do not belong to Proust’s narrator; these seem instead to belong to what Beckett called “aspects of [him]self,” or to other writers. Certain parts of the essay seem only tangentially related to the matter ostensibly at hand—an analysis of the *Recherche*—and these prove to be rehearsed arguments that Beckett injects into the essay with little regard for conceptual consistency. For example, in a letter to MacGreevy from July 1930, Beckett reports:

I was reading d’Annunzio on Giorgione again and I think it is all balls and mean nasty balls. I was thinking of Keats and Giorg[i]one’s two young men—the Concert and the Tempest—for a discussion of Proust’s floral obsessions. D’A seems to think that they are merely pausing between fucks. Horrible. (*LI*, 41)

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<sup>75</sup> Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1, *Swann’s Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terrence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (London: Vintage Books, 1992), 413.

In *Proust*, he writes,

This is not the terrible panic-stricken stasis of Keats, crouched in a mossy thicket [...]; nor yet the remote, still, almost breathless passion of a Giorgione youth [...] so finely suggested by d'Annunzio in his description of the Concerto [...] and so grossly misinterpreted by the same writer when he sees in the rapt doomed figure of the Tempesta a vulgar Leander resting between orgasms; nor yet the horrible pomegranates of "Il Fuoco." (*PTD*, 90–91)

Here multiple voices overlap, as references to Keats, d'Annunzio, and Giorgione reveal blurred lines between fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Keats's poetry is treated as poetry, but statements made within d'Annunzio's novel are treated as nonfictional, direct statements. In *Proust*, Beckett alternately acknowledges and ignores the particular discursive modes in which his quotations appear, creatively applying past observations and secondary readings from fictional works to an ostensibly nonfictional task. *Proust* repeats rehearsed phrases from Beckett's letters; it borrows wholesale d'Annunzio's reading of one of Giorgione's paintings in order to refute d'Annunzio's "horrible" reading of another; and it applies that same reading to *The Tempest*, implying a certain degree of conceptual coherence common to all of Giorgione's work.<sup>76</sup> It seems clear that, in his preparation for *Proust*, Beckett goes "phrase hunting" through his own letters and source texts in the same way that he reports going "phrase hunting" through St. Augustine in his preparation for *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (*LJ*, 62), and the resulting essay can be seen to cobble these phrases together in ways that reflect something of the same disregard for conceptual coherence that is so wantonly flaunted in *Dream*.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that "Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce" contains its own share of phrase-bombs. The essay's first paragraph contains little else. From its first line, "The

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<sup>76</sup> This last is an especially (if unintentionally) fictional maneuver given that, as the editors of Beckett's *Letters* point out, *The Concert* would later be attributed to Titian (*LII*, 42).

danger is in the neatness of identifications,” to its last, “Literary criticism is not book-keeping,” it conveys little in the way of straightforward explanation, except perhaps a brief outline of the “handful of abstractions” that will be dealt with in the remainder of Beckett’s essay (*Ex*, 3–4). Some of these expressions may be attributable to Joyce—Terence McQueeney points out that Beckett’s description of Vico as a “practical roundheaded Neapolitan” is a partial quotation of Joyce, who had described Vico to Padraic Colum as “a roundheaded Neapolitan.”<sup>77</sup> Even the “abstractions” might not necessarily be attributable to Beckett. Joyce exerted considerable influence over the contributions to the *Exagmination*. As he stated, “I did stand behind those twelve Marshals more or less directing them what lines of research to follow”<sup>78</sup>—or as Tim Conley puts it, “Instead of [...] spelling out his own ideas about language, dreams, Vico, Rebecca West, and whatever else might seem germane or instructive, Joyce deployed others to do his talking for him.”<sup>79</sup> In this sense, Beckett’s essay might be said almost literally to ventriloquize Joyce. This is not to say that the essay claims to offer any conclusive explanations by quoting directly from the horse’s mouth, however, for its heavy reliance on striking rhetorical effects implies that like Conley, Beckett may have sensed that “in our critical discourses, however varied in style or focus, we do not speak *to* the *Wake* or even *of* it as much as we speak *round* it” (Conley, xv).

Speaking around Joyce’s work is precisely what Beckett does in his essay, which is comically opaque, suggesting, as “Le Concentrisme” does, that to object to its paradoxical pronouncements is the equivalent of not getting the joke. The voice that speaks it is not necessarily Beckett’s, and his ability to disclaim it is equivalent to a joke-teller’s ability to say, “It

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<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Terence McQueeney, “Samuel Beckett as Critic of Proust and Joyce” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 1977), 10, n. 16. McQueeney quotes Padraic Colum, *Our Friend James Joyce* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958), 123.

<sup>78</sup> Stuart Gilbert, ed. *The Letters of James Joyce*, vol. 1 (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), 283.

<sup>79</sup> Tim Conley, introduction to *Joyce’s Disciples Disciplined*, xvi.

was all in fun; don't take it too seriously." Even this humorous aspect does not necessarily belong to Beckett. In a 1929 letter to Valery Larbaud, Joyce wrote,

My impression is that the paper cover, the grandfather's clock on the title page and the word Exagmination itself for instance incline reviewers to regard it as a joke, though these were all my doing, but some fine morning not a hundred years from now some enterprising fellow will discover the etymological history of the orthodox word examination and begin to change his wavering mind on the subject of the book.<sup>80</sup>

It is not clear from this letter whether Joyce intended for the book to be taken as a joke—indeed, he seems determined to leave the ambiguity intact—just as it is unclear whether Beckett's opaque language is intended to be laughable (*Ex*, 3). This ambiguity only reinforces that the critical attitude conveyed in the essay is utterly de-centered, un-attributable to any single intending subject. To paraphrase Stephen Dedalus, any controlling hand underlying Beckett's essay seems to have been refined out of existence.

Nevertheless, it is possible to imagine how such uncertainties might themselves be interpreted, if somewhat overzealously. The floating attitudes and tones of "Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce" could be read as analogous to the swirling voices of *Finnegans Wake* itself. The "flat, syllogistic drift" of *Proust* might be read as analogous to the manner in which Proust's "chain-figure of the metaphor" offers a "rhetorical equivalent" of the "real." Even the comical bewilderment inspired by the confusing overlapping of narrative frames in "Le Concentrisme" could be read as analogous to the utter bewilderment that du Chas experiences before the world: "The fauna is too abundant: here is all he can know" (*D*, 39, my translation). Meaning can always spin off in numerous, unpredictable directions, leaving direct, inexplicable expression—which Beckett describes as the defining feature of literature—perpetually out of reach.

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<sup>80</sup> Gilbert, ed. *The Letters of James Joyce*, vol. 1, 283–84.



## De-anchoring the Oeuvre

It may be helpful to think of the aim of Beckett's critical essays in terms of what Derek Attridge describes as an impossible, but desirable, "wholly nonallegorical reading of a literary work." As Attridge imagines it, a nonallegorical reading "would refrain from any interpretation whatsoever and would seek rather to do justice to the work's singularity and inventiveness by the creation of a text of equal singularity and inventiveness."<sup>81</sup> According to Beckett, *Work in Progress* and the *Recherche* are singularly inventive in that they gesture towards an inexpressible reality, so it might be in an effort at a similar inventiveness that Beckett's essays on them gesture towards an inexplicable form of artistic expression. The particular means by which the essays make that gesture—through the deployment of rehearsed and borrowed phrases irreducible to a single voice or viewpoint—might be understood with reference to Derrida's reading of Nietzsche in *On Nietzsche's Styles*. According to Derrida, Nietzsche wrote as he did in order to avoid making the very kinds of truth claims that he claims to reject:

[I]t is just such an illusion [of truth] that [Nietzsche] was analyzing even as he took care to avoid the precipitate negation where he might erect a simple discourse against [it]. For the reversal, if it is not accompanied by a discrete parody, a strategy of writing, or difference or deviation in quills, [...] is finally but the same thing, nothing more than a clamorous declaration of the antithesis. (95, 103)

In its very unevenness, Beckett's own critical style, too, seems designed to avoid making committed claims.

In this sense, Beckett's early critical essays might seem to share little with canonical modernist essays by figures such as Woolf, Eliot, Pound, and Yeats, who can seem wholly committed in their arguments for how the remit and aims of literature and art could be

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<sup>81</sup> Derek Attridge, "Against Allegory: Waiting for the Barbarians, Michael K, and the Question of Literary Reading," in *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, ed. Jane Poyner (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 65.

redefined. Yet Beckett's essays might still be conceived as committed in that they aim to function as examples of ideally experimental, non-committed modes of writing. Mooney refers to "Recent Irish Poetry" as a "Poundian" essay, and although her choice of adjective might owe only to the fact that Beckett's piece, like Pound's essays, often assumes a didactic and haughty tone—and in this respect Beckett would still share as much with Eliot as with Pound—there is another sense in which it could be called Poundian.<sup>82</sup> As Twitchell-Waas argues, Pound offers an "alternative critical model" to Eliot's, one in which "criticism [is] not directed toward the development of taste but toward [...] practical production."<sup>83</sup> Read as a fictional piece in its own right, "Recent Irish Poetry," like "Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce," *Proust*, and certainly "Le Concentrisme," seems directed toward the practical production of the ideal form of artistic expression it envisions.

It seems natural that the brevity of Beckett's career as a critic should encourage using his criticism as a lens through which to read his creative work. Yet since the boundaries between Beckett's academic career and his career as a poet, author, and playwright are so difficult to pin down, it is important to emphasize that the interwar criticism provides, at best, a biconvex or Cartesian lens, one that changes or distorts the shape of the object of focus depending on the angle at which the lens is held. Reading Beckett's criticism as nonfictional sketches of an aesthetic will produce an image of the fictional work as wholly dedicated to an expression of inexplicable effects, something that offers little in the way of meanings or messages. Reading the critical essays as fictional attempts to put into practice the aesthetics they sketch, on the other hand, can produce a wholly different view of Beckett's aesthetic practice. His fictional work can appear to be as self-contradictory and heterogeneous as the criticism, as reflective of meanings and messages as it is filled with warnings against searching for meanings and messages.

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<sup>82</sup> Mooney, "Kicking against the Thermolaters," 29.

<sup>83</sup> Jeffery Twitchell-Waas, "What Were the 'Objectivist' Poets?," *Modernism/modernity* 22, no. 2 (April 2015): 324–25.

This latter view also brings into focus the diversity of principles underlying the strategies Beckett's works use in their attempts to forestall interpretative resolution. There are many unfamiliar resonances between Beckett's reflections on the nature of artistic expression and those of other writers whose works provide relatively familiar coordinates for locating Beckett's resistance to interpretation. These resonances open up new ways of reading the self-reflexiveness, repetitions, and ambiguities that abound in Beckett's oeuvre. In the next chapter, I investigate self-reflexive mediations on the role of the author within Beckett's work. Read in conjunction with the self-presentational strategies of French Dadaists, these are argued to complicate a received deference towards Beckett's own interventions into interpretations of his work.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“The Idea Is to Caricature the Labour of Composition”: Clownish Metacommentary from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* to *Endgame***

Throughout his writing life, Beckett engaged in ironic ways with the common assumption that the author is in control of the work. In 1980, he imagined a scenario in which an onstage character could stumble upon a bit of waste paper containing extracts from *Texts for Nothing*, which the character would read aloud: “The idea,” Beckett wrote, “is to caricature the labour of composition.”<sup>84</sup> This character seems a dramatized version both of the struggling, failing author and of his imagined readers, and his fumbling about through bits of waste paper demonstrates just how comically moot it would be to inquire after Beckett’s own intentions. Yet although Beckett would seem to disclaim any authorial control here, the “idea” underlying this scenario is concretely determined in a way that suggests an attempt to control the reception of the text being read. In this chapter, I show how similar tensions underlie all those instances in which Beckett’s works seem to offer reflections, directly or indirectly, on the principles of their own composition in attempts to shape their own reception. I demonstrate how such instances of self-reflexive metacommentary resonate with playful forms of self-presentation used by Dadaists

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<sup>84</sup> Beckett to Joseph Chaikin, 5 September 1980, quoted in Gontarski, introduction to *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose*, xvi.

such as Tristan Tzara and Marcel Duchamp, who have numerous connections to Beckett's career and work. Ultimately, I find that such instances of metacommentary, which generally aim to forestall interpretative resolution, tend to demonstrate a clownish disregard for logical consistency and are interpretable both as sincere reflections on the mysteries of creation and as parodic caricatures of such reflections.

In order to investigate how this clownishness plays out over the course of Beckett's oeuvre and career, I find it rewarding in this chapter to focus on Beckett's posthumously published first novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and on his more canonically central play *Endgame*. The differences between these two works, in terms of genre and period of composition, are marked. Yet despite its dedication to the director Roger Blin, *Endgame* seems a work that is meant to be read as well as performed, and its playful representations of composition, translation, and even its play with punctuation can be shown to engage with ideas first explored in *Dream*. A look at the reception of *Endgame* bears out this overlap, for the issues that attracted the curiosity of the first *Endgame* critics would turn out already to have been explored in *Dream*. Like the stage piece Beckett imagined in 1980, both works have been shown to encode notions of authority and coherence that are ultimately revealed to be nonsensical. These similarities resonate with an issue lying beyond the texts themselves: namely, the fact that Beckett's direct comments on these works have exerted an especially heavy influence over their reception, with special attention being granted to those comments that seem to prohibit interpretations positing coherent intentions and hidden meanings.

For example, two brief passages penned by Beckett served as a standard by which to delimit acceptable interpretations of a 1967 Berlin production. In an insert in that production's program, Beckett states, "*Endspiel* [*Endgame*] will be sheer play [*Spiel*]. [...] So don't worry about riddles and solutions." In answer to the question, "Are you of the opinion that the author must have ready a solution to the riddle?" Beckett responds, "Not [the author] of this play" (*D*, 114,

my translation). According to these statements, the very search for a coherent interpretation of *Endgame* is misguided. Since there is no riddle to solve in the first place, the mysteries of the play cannot be *resolved*—and Beckett’s lithographed signature on this program insert suggests that this is the only correct or authorized (non-)interpretative approach to the play.<sup>85</sup> It is quasi-canonized by virtue of the inclusion of this dialogue in *Disjecta*, and while a number of studies have pointed out the parallels between the post-apocalyptic world of *Endgame* and specific historical issues arising in the atomic age, it is common for scholars to investigate the purely ludic aspects of the work: Karine Germoni and Pascale Sardin have investigated how *Endgame* plays with the conventions of French and English, and Andrew Hugill has investigated the parallels between the play and Duchamp’s writings on chess.<sup>86</sup>

The reception of *Endgame*, in which Beckett’s insistence on the irresolvability of the play has assumed a guiding role, finds affiliations with critical responses to the (controversial) publication of *Dream*, responses over which Beckett’s voice has exerted a similarly pointed influence. Perhaps because its extreme verbosity and allusiveness seem at odds with more familiarly Beckettian features such as constriction and hermeticism, Beckett’s own thoughts on the book have taken on a role similar to the role assumed by the comments he made on *Endgame*. Many readers tend to follow Beckett’s characterization of the novel as a “chest into which [he] threw [his] wild thoughts”—this line forms the opening epigraph of Eoin O’Brien’s foreword to the Calder edition of the novel (*DFMW*, xi). For those debating how best to produce a definitive version of such a jumble of events, characters, and meditations on the nature of life and art, all of which is only loosely related under the comical façade of a *Bildungsroman* organized around a

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<sup>85</sup> For a facsimile of the original insert, see “Spielzeit 1968-69: Generalintendant Boleslaw Barlog,” in “Program for 1967 production of *Endspiel* at Schiller-Theater Werkstatt 1967/68, Heft 187,” BC MS 1227/6/10, Samuel Beckett Collection, Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.

<sup>86</sup> Germoni and Sardin, “Tensions of the In-Between: Rhythm, Tonelessness and Lyricism in *Fin de partie/Endgame*,” *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 24 (2012): 335–51; hereafter cited parenthetically. Hugill, “Opposition and Sister Squares: Marcel Duchamp and Samuel Beckett,” *The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, first published 1 July 2013, updated 19 August 2015, <[toutfait.com/opposition-and-sister-squares-marcel-duchamp-and-samuel-beckett](http://toutfait.com/opposition-and-sister-squares-marcel-duchamp-and-samuel-beckett/)>.

protagonist, Belacqua Shuah, who sometimes disappears for multiple pages at a time, Beckett's interventions offer rare points of orientation. When, for example, S. E. Gontarski rejects the "epistemological paradigm that meaning is somehow contained immutably within and restricted to a text, impervious to the inconsistencies of language and the vicissitudes of culture"—a paradigm that indeed seems particularly inappropriate to Beckett's novel—he nevertheless maintains the premise that Beckett's evolving interpretations of his own work, "Beckett's latest rereading of Beckett," ought to be granted special weight in editorial decisions.<sup>87</sup> Although Beckett's novel might indeed be construed as an unorganized collection of unrelated, half-thought-through passages (as the image of the chest filled with wild thoughts suggests), Gontarski's argument reflects the broader consensus: namely, that it is a collection shaped by—and interpretable with reference to—careful authorial craftsmanship.

The acuteness of such appeals to Beckett's authority may owe something to historical circumstance. *Dream* was written in the summer of 1932 but published posthumously in 1992, when Beckett's reputation was well established. By then, his comments on his work had already come to exert a major influence on its reception, a partial consequence of which was the ensuing controversy over whether *Dream* ought to have been published at all given Beckett's reported disparagement of it in later life.<sup>88</sup> *Endgame* was written later, in 1957, and it was first performed and published shortly thereafter. This was a time when Beckett had achieved some mainstream success with *Waiting for Godot*, but when the critical response to his work was still in its infancy, which might account partially for why his earliest comments about his lack of insight into the play have become almost as canonical as the play itself.

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<sup>87</sup> Gontarski, "Editing Beckett," *Twentieth Century Literature* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 190–91, 196.

<sup>88</sup> David Tucker provides an overview of the entire affair in his "Posthumous Controversies: The Publications of Beckett's *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *Eleutheria*," in *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, ed. Mark Nixon (London: The British Library, 2011), 229–44; hereafter cited parenthetically.

This is not entirely without good reason, for the ironies latent within those comments do seem to arise within the work, as well. Those arising within *Endgame* are perhaps most profoundly explored in Theodor Adorno's 1961 essay "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," which for all its insistence on the play's historical significance nevertheless distances itself from a search for interpretative resolution (and this six years before the *Endspiel* insert). Adorno praises Beckett's oeuvre, and *Endgame* in particular, for its apparent capacity to generate its own momentum and its concomitant lack of meaning. For him, the plot of *Endgame* is "organized meaninglessness," a "clattering of machinery" whose very clattering is "surrender[ed] to" (120). Adorno draws similar conclusions about the play's dialogue, which he describes as an assemblage of unrelated "linguistic molecules": like "the philosophemes expounded in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*," Beckett's "phrases" are argued to constitute "those material components of the *monologue intérieur* which mind itself has become, the reified residue of education" (121).

Yet Adorno does not abandon entirely the concepts of constructedness and meaningfulness. This essay is even dedicated to Beckett, which implies that Adorno sees it as an homage to Beckett's own intention to avoid the impression of structuredness. The irony underlying that presumed intention is addressed within the essay itself:

Thought becomes as much a means of producing meaning for the work which cannot be immediately rendered tangible, as it is an expression of meaning's absence. [...] The interpretation of *Endgame* [...] cannot chase the chimera of expressing its meaning with the help of philosophical mediation. Understanding it can mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility, or concretely reconstructing its meaning structure—that it has none. (120)

For Adorno, a "transcendent" structure would reflect a synthesis of fully historical and fully aesthetic concerns, and its absence or impossibility is what guarantees that the play cannot be



understood in any conclusive way. Yet Adorno notes that this lack of structure is itself constructed. In his reading, *Endgame* produces a certain unity of form and content—that is, of plot structure and dialogue—in that Beckett’s “linguistic molecules” themselves point to a “construction of the senseless”: “[I]f they and their connections were rationally meaningful, then within the drama they would synthesize irrevocably into the very meaning structure of the whole which is denied by the whole” (120).

This reading of avant-garde aspirations would prove to be theoretically prescient. It anticipates studies of the historical avant-garde carried out in the late 1960s and 1970s, particularly Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, adduced below. These, in turn, resonate with Rosalind Krauss’s later emphasis on the carefully constructed, illusory nature of the *sprezzatura* associated with seemingly slapdash and fragmentary avant-garde works of art.<sup>89</sup> Adorno’s prescience might owe something to his sensitivity as a reader of Beckett’s script. His metaphor of linguistic molecules seems to resonate with Beckett’s metaphor of his bits of pipe, those fragmented phrases arranged to achieve certain tonal dynamics with little regard for logical coherence. Such apparent resonances between Adorno’s reading and Beckett’s stated principles of composition might account in part for why Adorno’s reading of *Endgame* still holds much sway in Beckett studies. Matthew Holt, for example, argues for the “grow[ing] importance” of Adorno’s reading as “the necessary ballast to the current tendency for art to be the ‘uncritical mirror image of the happy consciousness of late capitalism,’” and he concludes, “The purity of [Beckett’s] form (in the sense of its simplicity, its lucidity, but also [...] its coherency between parts) is in fact impure—it is damaged, incomplete and fragmentary.”<sup>90</sup> “Multiplicit[ies] of

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<sup>89</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” in *The Originality of The Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1981; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 151–70.

<sup>90</sup> Matthew Holt, “Catastrophe, Autonomy, and the Future of Modernism: Trying to Understand Adorno’s Reading of *Endgame*,” *Samuel Beckett Today/Anjourd’hui* 14 (2004): 263, 267. Holt’s quotation is drawn from Richard Wolin, “Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory,” *Representations* 32 (Autumn 1990): 48.

interpretation” are seen to be fostered (rather than resisted or simplified), and this view is implicitly applied to the oeuvre as a whole.

Beckett had been honing his technique for years by the time he wrote *Endgame*, but in *Dream* the principles underlying it seem to appear in their rawest form. Some of the best-known passages of the novel are those in which it implies that it strives for what it obliquely describes as “dehiscence, flottements, the coherence gone to pieces” and those in which it makes such now oft-cited pronouncements as, “The only unity in this story is, please God, an involuntary unity” (*DFMW*, 133, 139). In such instances, the novel appears to provide a roadmap (or anti-roadmap) for the narrative it offers. It addresses directly the very issues of fragmentariness and the inescapable appearance of constructedness that would preoccupy Adorno and so many other readers and critics. The stakes of such moments in *Dream* are by no means uniform, but they do share a number of family resemblances. “Unity,” in the above quotation, seems to refer to a clear and consistent narrative, a definition that seems especially apt given that this pronouncement occurs within a spate of unrelated narrative paragraphs. John Pilling has pointed out that this statement is “a nod in the direction of Proust,” and Pilling notes its ironic tint: “Whereas ‘involuntary memory’ is for Proust (as Beckett views the matter) ‘abstract’ and a ‘miracle’ [...], ‘involuntary unity’ is treated as little better than the voluntary unity which Beckett could have supplied for *Dream*, but which he has decided to dispense with” (70; Pilling quotes *PTD*, 33–34). The idea of “coherence gone to pieces” seems to operate at a more general level, in a way related to Adorno’s idea of Beckett’s “construction of the senseless.” Yet just as Adorno’s argument implies, *Dream* begrudgingly admits that concepts such as coherence and unity, conceived as indexes of authorial control and therefore as essential elements of meaning and interpretation, remain inescapable. There will always remain, at the very least, a residual unity, one that the author does not necessarily craft but that the reader (or editor) might detect in the author’s very refusal to craft.

Such issues have been addressed at length in recent studies of *Dream*. John Bolin, for example, examines how Beckett's descriptions of characters and events often leave some aspects conspicuously indeterminate in ways that are related to the fundamental multiplicity or disunity of all actions and identities. He also examines how Beckett's early novels tend to deploy metaphors in ambiguous ways in order to ensure that no firm position can be found from which to evaluate the work.<sup>91</sup> This chimes with Adorno's investigation of the absent "meaning structure" of Beckett's work, and it forms a common thread between Bolin's and Laura Salisbury's readings. When, for example, Salisbury uses competing theories of humor to understand the self-destructive or self-undermining narrative frames readily apparent within *Dream*, she argues that these frames tend to obscure and sometimes even reverse distinctions between the teller and the object of a joke. Here Salisbury finds in deliberate inconsistency the "dehiscing contortions of self-parody" that render coherent interpretation nearly impossible (58). Ultimately, however, both Salisbury and Bolin conclude that Beckett's works yield consistent, deliberate forms of untidiness. Salisbury describes *Dream* in terms of "an economy of intentional failure" that presages themes that will appear in Beckett's later writing (58). Bolin invokes a quotation taken from Beckett's own lectures at Trinity College Dublin in which Beckett refers to "the integrity of incoherence," which for Bolin implies that the concept of incoherence detectable in Beckett's novel is even coherent enough to be taught in a classroom setting (17).<sup>92</sup> Bolin applies the oxymoron contained in this quotation to his argument that in *Dream* "the work is both fragmented *and* united through the gaps and voids that proliferate at every level of its construction" (41). As Adorno did in his reading of *Endgame*, these recent studies find a coherent meaning in the very absence of coherent meaning.

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<sup>91</sup> John Bolin, *Beckett and the Modern Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. 17–42; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>92</sup> Bolin cites Rachel Burrows, notes on Samuel Beckett's lectures, Beckett Manuscript Collection, Trinity College Dublin Library, MIC 60, 37.

Such arguments have consistently gained in sophistication as critics continue to attempt to offer systematic accounts of the disdain for systemization that can make Beckett's work so compelling. Evidence of this disdain is not confined to Beckett's fiction: it is also articulated in some of its most pithy forms in his best-known comments on his work. Consider, for example, the now often-quoted question, included in the Shenker interview, of whether Beckett's "system [is] the absence of a system": to this logic, Beckett reportedly responded, "I can't see any trace of any system anywhere" (149). Such a categorical refusal to concede even a minor semantic point, even in a space outside of creative work, reflects Beckett's insistent ambition to portray his texts as utterly irreducible to any coherent framework. He seems even to strive to blur the line between work and life, between artistic and non-artistic expression. It is in this respect that I draw on Peter Bürger, who makes a similar observation about the historical avant-garde, and who puts forth a concept of the coherent or unified work that responds directly to Adorno's aesthetic theory, with which Adorno's comments on *Endgame* are commensurate. What is particularly interesting to me is that, like Adorno's essay on *Endgame*, Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, for all its critical independence, seems predicated upon the presumed aesthetics of the artists it discusses. Such parallels raise the question of the role that the imagined views of avant-garde artists play, or ought to play, in the interpretation of their work, a question that seems particularly acute when those avant-garde artists achieve mainstream status, and a question that seems not to go unnoticed by the artists themselves—as the examples of Tzara and Duchamp demonstrate.

### **Exhibiting Incoherence**

When overlaps between Beckett and Dada are addressed, it tends to be in terms of the influence of Zurich Dada on Beckett's later work. Enoch Brater, for example, traces the affinities between Tzara's manifesto "How to Make a Dadaist Poem" and the composition strategy Beckett

employed in composing *Lessness*, and Brater finds further affiliations between Tzara’s “Dada strategies” and works such as *Not I*, *That Time*, *Breath*, and *Quad*. These he teases out to include affinities between works such as *Happy Days* and *Molloy*, on the one hand, and on the other, Surrealism, “Dada’s far more accomplished stepchild”—the difference between Beckett and “Dada adventurists and their rear-guard associates” being, for Brater, that Beckett was to become far more interested in form than the historical avant-garde ever was.<sup>93</sup> Peter Fifield points out further resonances between Tzara and *Waiting for Godot*, and he goes on to develop the argument that “Dada in particular [...] resonates with elements of Beckett’s mature aesthetic.”<sup>94</sup> The comparison between Dada and Beckett seems to be historically appropriate because Beckett’s poetry appeared along with Dada work in Samuel Putnam’s 1931 collection *The European Caravan: An Anthology of the New Spirit in European Literature*. Several of Beckett’s translations of Tzara’s poetry appeared here, although Fifield is careful to point out that Beckett’s own “work as a translator—of poetry in particular—[...] often shows a more conventional sensibility, animated by acute perception and a well-turned phrase” (171).

*Dream* hardly shows a conventional sensibility, however, and it shares commonalities with Tzara’s work that go beyond the historical fact that it was written a year after *The European Caravan* appeared. Particularly interesting are those instances in *Dream* where the narrator seems to intervene for the author and seems to tell the reader, in comically inconsistent terms, how to understand the narrative it offers. In these instances, *Dream* seems almost to ventriloquize Tzara’s evolving (and incoherent) metaphors regarding composition, particularly those contained in his “Dada Manifesto 1918” (also collected in *The European Caravan*). Like many Dadaist writings, both Tzara’s manifesto and the manifesto-like statements included in *Dream* blur the

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<sup>93</sup> Enoch Brater, “From Dada to Didi: Beckett and the Art of His Century,” *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd’hui* 19 (2008): 173–74, 177.

<sup>94</sup> Peter Fifield, “‘I Am Writing a Manifesto Because I Have Nothing to Say’ (Soupault): Samuel Beckett and the Interwar Avant-Garde,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, 171; hereafter cited parenthetically.

line between a serious articulation of artistic ambitions and a clownish mix of self-exhibition and obscurantism. These comparisons offer lenses through which to view wider resonances between Dadaist play with notions of authority and coherence and a similar form of play that arises in later Beckettian works such as *Endgame*.

Like Tzara's "Monsieur Antipyrine's Manifesto," which was read aloud at the first Dada demonstration in Zurich in 1916 and which proclaimed that Dada is "for and against unity," Tzara's "Dada Manifesto 1918" calls concepts such as unity into question in a manner that is comically un-unified:

I'm writing this manifesto to show that you can perform contrary actions at the same time, in one single, fresh breath; I am against action; as for continual contradiction, and affirmation too, I am neither for nor against them, and I won't explain myself because I hate common sense.<sup>95</sup>

In the same "fresh breath" as his claim that it is possible to perform contrary actions simultaneously, Tzara claims to be against action entirely, thereby performing his own claim in the act of making it. This demonstrates a unified commitment to contradiction, yet even that is undermined in his next "breath," in which he claims that he is neither "for nor against" continual contradiction or affirmation. This sort of constant, illogical self-undermining, Tzara implies, ought to be found in the (non-)structure of a work of art: "[E]very sort of construction converges into a boring sort of perfection. [...] A work of art [...] [is] neither gay nor sad, neither light nor dark" (4). Such descriptions grant a quasi-mystical—or comically untenable—status to the work of art, which seems to be indescribable. Tzara applies the same description to "the work of creative writers," which he contrasts with the work of writers who merely "like to moralise and discuss or ameliorate psychological bases": "Every page should explode, either

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<sup>95</sup> Tzara, "Monsieur Antipyrine's Manifesto," in *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, trans. Barbara Wright (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2011), 1. Tzara, "Dada Manifesto 1918," in *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, 4; hereafter cited parenthetically.

because of its profound gravity, or its vortex, vertigo, newness, eternity, or because of its staggering absurdity, the enthusiasm of its principles, or its typography” (7).

The themes of continual contradiction, of light and dark, of the absolute, the pure, the cosmic, the eternal, are what find affiliations with *Dream*'s own equally outrageous and comic meditations on artistic expression, particularly one that occurs near the beginning of the novel, when the voice of the narrator (or narrators) suddenly breaks away from a description of Belacqua gazing up at the stars in order to offer an extended comparison between a work of art and the night sky. This reflection has little to do with Belacqua—indeed, upon completing the meditation and returning to Belacqua, the narrator comments, “Nothing whatever of the kind of course occupied his fetid head” (*DFMW*, 17)—and standing outside the story proper as it does, it seems to offer comment on the principles according to which *Dream* itself is composed. In the hysterically overblown rhetoric of this passage, the “night firmament” is ultimately equated with “the art surface,” but along the way it is also compared with “constellations of genius,” cast as a chart for “movements of the mind,” and re-figured as a “colander” with “demented perforation” (*DFMW*, 16–17). This puzzling series of images—which I will call the night sky passage—reads like one of Tzara's manifestoes. Using extreme cosmic imagery, it conceives of an ideal work in untidy, self-contradictory terms, a description that seems to hint either at the impossibility of interpreting (or even conceiving of) the work as a coherent whole or at a certain joking unwillingness to make a serious attempt at it.

One particularly striking similarity between this passage and Tzara's manifesto is the fact that non-committal, shifting valences are attached to the concepts of light and dark. The very idea of using the night sky as a metaphor for the “art surface,” which in the case of literature is nothing more than the surface of the text, leads to confusion. While the dark parts of the night sky are the spaces between the stars, the empty sections, the darkened sections of a text, those stained by printer's ink, are the primary objects of a reader's attention, the parts that have been

filled. The same conflict applies to the connotations attached to light, of course, for a text's light parts are the negative, empty spaces between words, while the light parts of the night sky are the spaces occupied by the stars. When this passage identifies "a depthless lining of hemisphere, its crazy stippling of stars," with "movements of the mind charted in light and darkness," and when it describes the stars as being of the mind's "creation," it casts light as a metaphor for the meaning-bearing sections of the work, but it introduces further confusion by suggesting in turn that this meaning is readable only within the blank spaces between the words (*DFMW*, 16).

After this segment, an added layer of metaphor introduces further ambiguity: "The inviolable criterion of poetry and music, the non-principle of their punctuation, is figured in the demented perforation of the night colander" (*DFMW*, 16). Tzara writes in his 1918 manifesto that he is "in principle [...] against manifestos" just as he is "against principles" (3). Here a similarly confusing formulation seems to be taking shape (or perhaps more accurately, not taking shape). The stars could be equated with the holes in the colander, which might equate them with punctuation, the dark parts of the text corresponding to the light parts of the night sky. However, the spaces between the stars could equally be equated with the colander's holes. It is unclear here whether non-principled punctuation, defined as the *sine qua non* of poetry, is figured as light or darkness.

Granting equal weight to both of these possible interpretations enables opposite approaches to *Dream* and, in turn, to other works in Beckett's canon. The suggestion that the blank spaces between the words ought to define a reader's understanding, later articulated in Belacqua's desire to write a book that communicates via silence and intervals (*DFMW*, 138), is as familiar as is the frustrated desire to resist logorrhea articulated in *The Unnamable*, or the desire to "hold [one's] peace, and sit quiet," as Hamm puts it (*CDW*, 126). Yet the opposite tendency within this passage, the suggestion that it is indeed the terms, the ink-stained portions of the text, that communicate, conflicts with the former, more readily recognizable interpretation, suggesting



that the words do have something to convey. Attention to such ambiguities also sheds some new light on Beckett's "German letter," in which Beckett writes that language ought to be abused "in order to arrive at the things (or the nothing) lying behind it" (*D*, 65). Received conceptions of Beckett's absolute negativity might seem to emphasize the possibility that nothing lies behind language, yet in the context of the inconsistencies of *Dream's* night sky passage, it seems necessary to emphasize that it is equally likely that something is indeed there. "Something" and "nothing" seem reversible and interchangeable according to whim.

Hugill's work suggests that *Endgame*, too, might resonate with the writings of major Dadaists, and indeed the play reflects its own dedication to interpretative indeterminacy, particularly in its concern with beginnings and endings. This theme is deployed most obviously in Hamm's penultimate soliloquy, in which he anticipates both his own end and the end of the play with the enigmatic line, "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on" (*CDW*, 126). Sticking to the ludic aspects of this line—although a historically specific and decidedly more serious reading is equally possible—I would first point out that it suggests that *Endgame* itself has a linear structure with no beginning or end, which would grant credence to the common critical view that *Endgame* exploits a dramatic situation in which each apparent end is only another beginning.<sup>96</sup> This interpretation puts pressure on the concept of the self-contained work in the same way that, in this same soliloquy, Hamm sarcastically interrogates the concept of the self-contained life: "Moment upon moment, pattering down [...] and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life" (*CDW*, 126). This is not the only possible interpretation of Hamm's line, however. As the quasi-manifestoes of *Dream* often do, Hamm's reflection suggests opposite meanings with a single image, for this line can also be interpreted as an exploration of the idea that the work has a circular, self-contained structure. This is an idea that had interested Beckett

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<sup>96</sup> Germoni and Sardin argue that "[*Endgame*] makes the experience of the impossibility of ending concrete for the spectators; it stages much of how Beckett must have felt[...] [...] the 'end is in the beginning and yet we [*sic*] go on.'" Germoni and Sardin, "Tensions of the In-Between," 335–36.

at least since writing *Proust*, for in a 1930 letter to Thomas MacGreevy, he complains that his writing is paralyzed in indecision: “I don’t know whether to start at the end or the beginning” (*LI*, 43). The problem is that the moment at which Proust’s narrator conceives his book, a moment that occurs in the final volume of the *Recherche*, might more properly constitute the *beginning* of Proust’s work, if the work is conceived as an abstract, coherent entity. *Endgame*, too, might be thought of in this way, as the similarities between its initial tableau and its final tableau seem to indicate.

These inconsistencies call to mind other major works that can seem to be simultaneously incoherent and carefully crafted. The first section of *Molloy*, for example, seems to begin at the end of the story, at the moment of narration begun in Molloy’s mother’s bed, suggesting from the first a structure akin to what Beckett sees in the *Recherche*. Yet Molloy’s narrative ends with him far away from this bed—that is, far from where, logically speaking, he ought to end up. Such inconsistencies can invite comparisons between the methods of composition prescribed or proscribed in Beckett’s work and his accounts of his own methods. In *Dream*, the narrator deplores that Balzac, because “[h]e is absolute master of his material,” could “write the end of his book before he has finished the first paragraph, because he has turned all his creatures into clockwork cabbages” (*DFMW*, 119–20). This attitude might suggest taking Beckett at his word when according to Charles Juliet he says, “When I wrote the first sentence in *Molloy*, I had no idea where I was heading” (141–42). Yet studies of Beckett’s careful emendations to his manuscripts show that the composition of works such as *Molloy* and *Fin de partie*, and their translation into English, involved quite a bit of planning and re-thinking—in fact, the first paragraph of *Molloy* was the last one Beckett wrote, which suggests that the novel’s convoluted structure is indeed a crafted one.<sup>97</sup> Beckett’s accounts of the genesis of his work are clearly

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<sup>97</sup> See Pim Verhulst and Wout Dillen, “‘I can make nothing of it’: Beckett’s Collaboration with *Merlin* on the English *Molloy*,” *Samuel Beckett Today/ Ajourd’hui* (2014): 107–20. On the translation of *Fin de partie*, see Germoni and Sardin, “Tensions of the In-Between.”

somewhat guarded. They might be nearly as fictional as his depictions of the creative process within his work.

## Clowning Provocations

The blurring of the line between self-revelation and obscurantism also blurs the line between critical self-commentary and artistic expression. This seems particularly acute in Beckett's case thanks to his oxymoronic status as a mainstream avant-garde writer, but it is also acute in the case of Dada artists, who share a similar status that can seem to lend a particular weight even to their most lighthearted and irreverent forms of self-presentation. In journals such as *The Blind Man*—a forerunner to Francis Picabia's *391*—Dada appears as a movement fully involved in social upheaval and opposed to artistic tradition. In the May 1917 issue, for example, an anonymous article refers to an outrage surrounding Duchamp's submission of his *Fountain* at the *Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists*. The article claims that Duchamp's piece had been described as “immoral” and a clear instance of “plagiarism,” but no specific outraged parties are cited.<sup>98</sup> Within this same issue is an invitation to a “Blind Man's Ball, a new-fashioned hop, skip, and jump,” a seemingly sordid, explicitly anti-bourgeois affair, one at which “[r]omantic rags are requested” and “guests not in costume” are to be relegated to “bought-and-paid-for boxes.”<sup>99</sup> It also contains a pleading letter in which an anonymous Midwestern mother appeals to fellow mothers to keep art “sane and beautiful” and to resist new trends in art pioneered by “people without refinement, cubists, futurists,” who “are not artists.”<sup>100</sup> Although none of these pieces contains an explicit wink or nudge, each seems comic in intent, and as likely as not the

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<sup>98</sup> “The Richard Mutt Case,” *The Blind Man 2* (May 1917): 5. For an overview of the full history of the work and the controversies it inspired, see William A. Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp: Fountain* (Houston, TX: Menil Foundation, 1989).

<sup>99</sup> “The Blind Man's Ball,” *The Blind Man 2* (May 1917): 2.

<sup>100</sup> “Letter from a Mother,” *The Blind Man 2* (May 1917): 8. It is interesting (and entertaining) to compare this piece with the comical “Letter of Protest” included at the end of the *Exagmination*, which provides a similar send-up of American philistinism (*Ex*, 193–94).

controversies, parties, and concerns they describe are invented out of whole cloth. Like Tzara's manifestoes, they are obviously best taken with a grain of salt.

Nevertheless, it seems in reaction to these sorts of pranking self-presentations, rather than to the specifics of any particular works of art, that Bürger offers his now-famous theory that avant-garde works were directed against art as an autonomous institution:

The intention of the avant-gardiste may be defined as the attempt to direct toward the practical the aesthetic experience (which rebels against the praxis of life) that Aestheticism developed. What most strongly conflicts with the means-ends rationality of bourgeois society is to become life's organizing principle. (34)

Such an assessment chimes as much with avant-garde modes of self-presentation as it does with implications arising from any particular artworks, and those modes of self-presentation play a particularly important role when Bürger addresses the supposed failure of the avant-garde to dissolve the category of the self-contained work. According to Bürger, this category is generally seen to have entered a "crisis" in the face of avant-garde provocations—and here Bürger cites Adorno, who writes, "Today the only works which really count are those which are no longer works at all" (quoted in Bürger, 55).<sup>101</sup> What Bürger observes, however, is that what is at stake is not the concept of the work *per se* but rather one type of work, the "organic work of art," which is to be distinguished from a more "general meaning of the concept 'work'" that survives the ostensible crisis initiated by the avant-garde:

Generally speaking, the work of art is to be defined as the unity of the universal and the particular. Although the work of art is not conceivable if this unity is not present, unity was achieved in widely varying ways during different periods in the history of art. In the organic (symbolic) work of art, the unity of the universal and the particular is posited

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<sup>101</sup> Bürger quotes Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 30.

without mediation; in the nonorganic (allegorical) work to which the works of the avant-garde belong, the unity is a mediated one. Here the element of unity is withdrawn to an infinite distance, as it were. In the extreme case, it is the recipient who creates it. [...] The avant-gardiste work does not negate unity as such (even if the Dadists had such intentions) but a specific kind of unity, the relationship between part and whole that characterizes the organic work of art. (56)

Bürger points out that Adorno, too, allows this point elsewhere when he writes, “Even when art insists on the greatest degree of dissonance and disharmony, its elements are also those of unity. Without it, they would not even be dissonant” (quoted in Bürger, 56).<sup>102</sup> This argument is congruent with the argument that Beckett’s purported absence of a system is itself a system, and it rests on the assumption that the avant-garde—a category Bürger uses loosely to refer to artists across a wide range of periods, movements, and locations—is defined by a unified ambition to eradicate the concept of unity from interpretations of their work.

The intimate connection between coherent artistic intentions and concepts such as unity is further elucidated when Bürger writes of such “nonorganic” works,

[A]n interpretation that does not confine itself to grasping logical connections but examines the procedures by which the text was composed can certainly discover a relatively consistent meaning in them. [...] Instead of proceeding according to the hermeneutic circle and trying to grasp a meaning through the nexus of whole and parts, the recipient will suspend the search for meaning and direct attention to the principles of construction that determine the constitution of the work. (79)

For Bürger, even the most incoherent, unstructured pieces can be interpreted by recourse to “the principles of [their] construction”: they can still be classified as works in a general sense if their

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<sup>102</sup> Bürger quotes Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 235. This translation is presumably Michael Shaw’s.

principles of composition are interpreted as part of the work itself. This maneuver seems logical enough, but artists do not necessarily need to be taken at their word when they claim to pursue wholeheartedly the impossible goal of an utterly fragmented work. The playful or comic tone of Tzara's writings and those contained in *The Blind Man* suggests that many Dada artists were perfectly aware of the naïveté of their stated goals, and their putative intention to “negate unity” might have extended to an intention to negate, or at least play with, unity of intention.

The type of interpretative logic that Bürger espouses seems to have been anticipated by Tzara, for example, who in his 1918 manifesto carefully ensures that even his principles of composition are described in the illogical, quasi-mystical terms similar to those in which the artwork is described:

A painting is the art of making two lines, which have been geometrically observed to be parallel, meet on a canvas, before our eyes, in the reality of a world that has been transposed according to new conditions and possibilities. This world is neither specified nor defined in the work[.] [...] For its creator it has neither cause nor theory. *Order = disorder; ego = non-ego; affirmation = negation*: the supreme radiations of an absolute art. Absolute in the purity of its cosmic and regulated chaos, eternal in that globule that is a second which has no duration, no breath, no light and no control. (7)

My aim here is not to try to untangle once and for all such a knot of oxymoron, but rather to point out how the very convolutedness of its logic playfully deflects the relatively straightforward conclusion that even the ignorance or blindness of the creator can be understood as a principle of the work's construction. The absence of a structure can indeed be conceived as a structure, and judging by the consistent manner in which these metaphors are mismatched, the structure of Tzara's ideal work would need to be as carefully crafted as a good joke—perhaps more carefully crafted, in fact, than the very “organic” works against which Bürger claims Dada railed. Tzara's own railing is particularly humorous because ultimately very little is at stake in his manifesto. He

raises ironies and self-contradictions to a fever pitch, and his metaphors for creativity seem comically irrelevant pretexts for self-exhibition, for showing off just how far he can take his verbal acrobatics without being brought back to earth.

*Dream*, too, describes the creative process in a clownish manner that seems to anticipate and pre-emptively subvert interpretations turned to the principles by which it was composed. Within the night sky passage, the movements of “the mind achieving creation,” described alternately as “a rhapsody of energy,” a “scurrying and plunging towards exitus,” and “the ultimate mode and factor of the creative integrity, its proton, incommunicable,” are ultimately figured as the “fidgeting” of a “rat” located “behind the astral incoherence of the art surface” (*DFMW*, 16–17). The work is conceived as a “depthless lining of hemisphere,” the embodiment of the mind’s “movements,” yet only a few lines later, the relationship between author and work is reversed, the “shaftheads of [the work’s] statement” guiding the movement of the author’s mind, which merely “rises” to them (*DFMW*, 16). In the first instance, the work traces or paraphrases the movements of the mind; in the second instance, the movements of the mind trace or paraphrase the work. Then, beginning with the phrase, “The mind suddenly entombed,” the passage concludes on a note that leads to further ambiguity. The movement of the author’s mind is now obscured by the surface of the text, “invisible” and “incommunicable” (*DFMW*, 16–17). In the final instance, neither paraphrases the other. There seems to be neither determinate cause nor determinate theory in the relationship between author and work, and opposite claims about that relationship are presented side by side.

*Endgame* has no direct equivalent of *Dream*’s narrator, no intermediate level of diegesis between narrative and reader at which to play with distinctions between content and commentary. Yet it nevertheless contains moments of self-reflexiveness. It handles theatrical conventions in a manner that seems to suggest that the playwright is merely going through the motions, parodying the notion that the intense feeling of anxiety pervading the play could be

controlled or reduced to a standardized format. These occur right from the start of the play, from Clov's flat-footed exposition—"I'll now go to my kitchen [...] and wait for him to whistle me"—to Hamm's equally flat-footed announcement that it is his turn to introduce himself: "Me—[*he yawns*—to play" (*CDW*, 93). Such self-reflexiveness is particularly obvious when Hamm invokes theatrical terminology and convention, as when he chastises Clov for responding to one of his asides and comments that he is "warming up for [his] last soliloquy" (*CDW*, 130). In such instances, Hamm seems to have access to the viewpoint of the playwright, and his blindness and confinement to a wheelchair, at this level, seem metaphors for the nearly insurmountable difficulties a playwright would face in trying to control, through recourse to theatrical convention, the various moods that emerge over the course of the action of a play. There is an incongruity reflected here between the purely mechanical aspects of the play and those that seem to reflect intensely personal expression.

This incongruity—viewed in the context of the wildly exaggerated importance that *Dream* and the Dadaists attach to such considerations in their work—has implications for Beckett's own comments on *Endgame*. Those comments can be seen not only as serious, straightforward attempts to control the terms in which the work is received, but also as evasive pranking or clowning designed to deflect an imagined reader's or audience member's serious interest in identifying coherent principles of composition. Consider James Knowlson's description of *Endgame* and of Beckett's own comments on the play: "There are no accidents in *Fin de partie*," Beckett has stated. [...] A line of tragedy is often followed by one of comedy. There is pathos, undercut by bathos" (395).<sup>103</sup> Knowlson's general remarks about the play seem accurate enough, but what they highlight is its clownish nature: the clown, too, is both a comic and a tragic figure. Beckett's assurance that *Endgame* is carefully crafted seems equally clownish, for that assurance does not lead to any coherent principles by which it might be interpreted. This is demonstrated

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<sup>103</sup> Knowlson quotes Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 152.



in the inconsistencies that Knowlson points out in other anecdotes about Beckett's comments on *Endgame*:

Several times, in rare unguarded moments, Beckett has said that Hamm and Clov are Vladimir and Estragon at the end of their lives. Once he qualified this remark, stating that Hamm and Clov were actually himself and Suzanne [Déchevaux-Dumesnil, Beckett's lifelong partner,] as they were in the 1950s—when they found it difficult to stay together but impossible to leave each other. (395)<sup>104</sup>

According to the first remark, *Endgame* seems in some sense to have composed itself, with the characters Vladimir and Estragon naturally morphing into Hamm and Clov with little involvement from Beckett. This coheres with other comments Beckett is said to have made, as when he reportedly “told Patrick Magee, who played Hamm in a London production, that he had no idea what went on in Hamm's mind,” or when in a similar way he claimed that placing Nagg and Nell in trash cans had no wider significance for him—it was merely a “technically feasible way to have them make their abrupt and unobtrusive entrances and exits” (Knowlson, 396). According to Beckett's remark regarding Suzanne and himself, however, it seems that the play was composed with reference to something extremely personal, as if in some way the purely mechanical were mystically connected to the personal.

### **Fictionalizing the Method**

It is clear that Beckett took great care when composing *Fin de partie* and translating it into English. Even Germoni and Sardin, who argue that “language becomes mechanical in Hamm's speech, one word triggering another,” nevertheless conclude, “It seems as though Beckett were seeking to achieve [...] [a] deconstruction of the conventions and trends of [French and

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<sup>104</sup> Knowlson cites “Jean Martin, Roger Blin, Patrick Magee, Jack MacGowran.”

English]” (336). According to such logic, Hamm’s “mechanical” speech does suggest some coherent compositional principle on Beckett’s part: namely, an ambition to reveal the arbitrary nature of “conventions and trends” of language. This argument resonates with a number of approaches to Beckett’s oeuvre more generally—it finds affiliations, for example, with Emilie Morin’s wider argument that throughout Beckett’s work translation operates as a “principle of composition” that fosters a sense of linguistic displacement.<sup>105</sup> When analyzing Beckett’s translations of Surrealist poetry, Sardin and Germoni similarly detect meaningful coherence in how Beckett toys with seemingly arbitrary attributes of language:

If some of Beckett’s translations appear to be literal renditions [...], slight differences in punctuation, rhythm, syntax, or diction prove Beckett *adapted* or *transposed*, as he said, rather than *translated* literally. His translations are independent, very personal pieces. In that, they are in keeping with the prevalent modernist vision of translation as the creation of an autonomous work. (750)

On a similar note, given Beckett’s well-known care with diction, punctuation, and syntax within his own work, it seems self-evident that his method of composition was anything but purely mechanical, even if he tends to place himself in the role of translator in a way that de-authorizes his authorial voice, as Sinéad Mooney claims. Such de-authorization can never be total, for as Mooney acknowledges, the inseparability of the concepts of translation and creation has been well established both within Beckett studies and within translation studies generally.

*Endgame* itself seems determined to exacerbate rather than resolve ambiguities surrounding the methods by which artistic expression is achieved. A certain clownish ambiguity is detectible in Hamm’s principles when he composes his own pieces. The two competing conceptions of the composition process—as an act of translating some content according to

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<sup>105</sup> See Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*, 55–95.

preordained conventions and patterns and as an act of creating something independent and personal—are present within depictions of Hamm’s translation of Baudelaire:

A little poetry. *Pause.* You prayed— *Pause. He corrects himself.* You CRIED for night; it comes— *Pause. He corrects himself.* It FALLS: now cry in darkness. *He repeats, chanting.* You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness. *Pause.* Nicely put, that. (CDW, 133)

This is Hamm’s English version of the second line of Baudelaire’s poem “*Recueillement*,” the first stanza of which reads as follows:

Sois sage, ô ma Douleur, et tiens-toi plus tranquille.  
Tu réclamaïs le Soir; il descend; le voici:  
Une atmosphère obscure enveloppe la ville,  
Aux uns portant la paix, aux autres le souci.<sup>106</sup>

At first glance, Hamm’s self-corrections suggest that he strives for semantic fidelity to Baudelaire’s original, and in this sense he produces a purely mechanical translation. “It falls,” for example, is undoubtedly closer semantically to “il descend” than is “it comes.” Even though it might be objected that Hamm’s decision to replace “you prayed” with “you cried” seems inexplicable in terms of the original—both options seem a suitable translation of “tu réclamaïs”—Hamm’s self-correction here avoids introducing a problematic religious connotation. At the same time, however, Hamm’s self-corrections also contain an element of the personal—the evocations of crying and falling resonate with the atmosphere of desperation and panic pervading the play.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, when he substitutes “now cry in darkness” for “le voici,”

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<sup>106</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “*Recueillement*,” in *Les Fleurs du Mal: Édition de 1861*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 234.

<sup>107</sup> “You cried” seems to be Beckett’s own invention; “Tu réclamaïs” has been translated elsewhere as “Thou calledst” (Lord Alfred Douglas, 1909), “You called” (Robert Lowell, 1961), and “You begged” (Frances Cornford, 1976), but as far as I know, nowhere as “You cried.” See Carol Clark and Robert Sykes, eds., *Baudelaire in English* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 224–26.

Hamm's diction seems to be guided by his sense of his own situation. Isolated now from Clov, Nagg, and Nell, Hamm seems to offer his conception of himself in this line. Yet "now cry in darkness" responds to the dictates of convention, as well. In Baudelaire's sonnet, "le voici" is followed by a description of the darkening "atmosphère" and conforms to an A-B-A-B rhyme scheme, anticipating the rhyme with "le souci." Hamm's line, standing at the end of his "poem" as it does, takes a turn and offers a reflection on what precedes in the same way that the final lines of a sonnet do. That reflection also contributes to the self-referentiality of this "last soliloquy," which adheres to theatrical convention by offering the protagonist's final self-assessment (*CDW*, 130).

Even in *Fin de partie*, in which Hamm seems merely to quote Baudelaire, minute changes in punctuation—Baudelaire's semicolon after "il descend" is a colon in Hamm's line, and Baudelaire's colon after "le voici" becomes Hamm's period—suggest a concession to a need to focus not on the village but on the descending dark itself.<sup>108</sup> There is, of course, only so much that Beckett can do to ensure that an actor will deliver this line in a particular way, but the excess of instruction seemingly contained in these minute changes of punctuation can cast even the playwright himself as a bit of a figure of fun, someone whose relative lack of control over the performed play helps to portray the search for coherent compositional principles as all the more misguided. In a similar way, Hamm's "[n]icely put"—"[j]oli ça"—reinforces, with a sort of cynical laughter, that he is both intimately connected to and totally disconnected from the poem he produces (or perhaps, to put it in the terms Tzara might be more likely to use, he is neither connected nor disconnected). A gallows humor arises from this incongruity. Hamm's attention to the purely aesthetic aspect of the lines he utters, of how nicely they are put, is laughably inappropriate to the dark realization they contain.

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<sup>108</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Fin de partie* (Paris: Minuit, 1957), 110–11.

Many of Beckett's aspiring authors similarly vacillate between seemingly mechanical expressions and utterances that reveal deeper psychological truths, but perhaps none more explicitly so than Belacqua when he hints at a method of composition that would seem to give rise to an impossibly personally intense and yet un-crafted work. He arrives at this stance when he contemplates a particularly pleasing turn of phrase uttered by Lucien, the phrase "[b]lack diamond of pessimism," which the narrator cites without giving any context (*DFMW*, 47).

Belacqua's reported response to the phrase suggests that the context is irrelevant:

Belacqua thought [the phrase] was a nice example, in the domain of words, of the little sparkle hid in the ashes, [...] the thing that the conversationalist, with his contempt of the tag and the ready-made, can't give you; because the lift to the high spot is precisely from the tag and the ready-made. The uniform, horizontal writing, flowing without accident, of the man with a style, never gives you a margarita. (*DFMW*, 47–48)

The metaphor of the "tag and the ready-made" resonates tantalizingly with Beckett's own metaphor of his "bits of pipe" and seems very close to what Adorno refers to as "linguistic molecules." The implication, at least on the most obvious level, is that a brazen reliance on the mechanical propensities of language to arrange itself according to the conventions of collocation, rhythm, and cliché—and the propensity of artistic expression in particular to arrange itself according to generic conventions—is necessary to ensure that the work will invite a suitable reception sensitive to its artistry. At the same time, however, an idealized absence of style is seen to stem from something that is very personal, as is indicated by the mention of accident, the part of grammar concerning the inflection of verbs according to who is speaking: I, we, you, he, she, it, or they. For Belacqua, the "margarita" can only come about through a paradoxically personal inflection of the mechanical unfolding of expression—just as "the mind achieving creation" is figured as one that is both connected and unconnected to "the art surface," and just

as Hamm's adaptation of Baudelaire seems to be simultaneously dictated by the demands of convention and by extremely personal ruminations.

Belacqua develops his improbable theory further when he resolves to write his own book. This is a moment that scholars have seen as germane to understanding how Beckett himself plays with the issue of authority,<sup>109</sup> and in it Belacqua describes a method of composition laced with contradictions that resonate with the contradictions within Hamm's method of translation. Significantly, this is a vision that comes shortly after Belacqua rejects the pursuit of erudition and decides that he is "inclined to agree with Grock" (*DFMW*, 137), referring to the Swiss "king of clowns" whose catchphrase "nicht möglich" recurs throughout *Dream*.<sup>110</sup> Proceeding rather clownishly himself, and in lieu of quoting another modern French poet in translation (Rimbaud this time, who has also "mastered the art of the tag"), Belacqua articulates a convoluted artistic vision:

I shall write a book, he mused [...]—I am hemmed in [...]—a book where the phrase is self-consciously smart and slick, but of a smartness and slickness other than that of its neighbours on the page. The blown roses of a phrase shall catapult the reader into the tulips of the phrase that follows. The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement, between the flowers that cannot coexist, between the antithetical (nothing so simple as antithetical) seasons of words. [...] It will be a ramshackle, tumbledown, a bone-shaker, held together with bits of twine, and at the same time as innocent of the slightest velleity

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<sup>109</sup> See, for example, Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), esp. 45–49.

<sup>110</sup> On Grock's importance to the history of clowning, see Jon Davison, *Clown: Readings in Theatre Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 9–16. For a taste of Grock's own sense of humor, which shares the love of continual self-contradiction reflected in Tzara's writings and in *Dream*, see Grock's autobiography, *Grock: King of Clowns*, ed. Ernst Konstantin, trans. Basil Creighton (1956; London: Methuen, 1957). Grock's catchphrase was actually the Swiss German "nit möglich," but throughout *Dream* it is rendered in standard German as "nicht möglich."

of coming unstuck as Mr Wright's original flying-machine that could never be persuaded to leave the ground. (*DFMW*, 137–40)

This is as explicit a statement of authorial intention as is made by any aspiring author within Beckett's oeuvre, and again concepts resonant with metaphors of "bits of pipe" or "linguistic molecules"—here, "smart and slick" phrases—are germane.

Belacqua describes an ideal "book" that sounds very much like *Dream* itself, and he does so in terms as extreme and as contradictory as those used in Tzara's manifestoes and in the ruminations of *Dream*'s narrator. Just as later works such as *Endgame* have been seen to undercut themselves consistently—"pathos is undercut by bathos"—Belacqua's ideal book will be self-undermining, relying for its effect on an utter incoherence of structure, on the simultaneous presence of "flowers that cannot coexist" and of "antithetical seasons of words." The imagined book seems to be as motivated by Belacqua's ambition to overcome being "hemmed in" as by its own mechanical unfolding, with the "blown roses" of one phrase naturally "catapult[ing] the reader" into the following phrase. It will be obviously ramshackle and yet without any appearance of being deliberately so: his book will be "innocent of the slightest velleity of coming unstuck." The irony of the comparison with "Mr. Wright's original flying machine" is that while that machine certainly was not designed to come unstuck in the colloquial sense of breaking down, it did aim to come unstuck in the literal sense of unsticking itself from the ground. Even the terms in which compositional (non-)principles are described serve to obscure those principles by leaving them interpretable in contradictory ways.

These contradictory principles suggest resonances not only with Tzara's work but also with Duchamp's. Relatively little has been written on these overlaps, with one notable exception being a book chapter by Jessica Prinz commenting on the importance of "nonsense, nonsequiturs, and short-circuits to meaning": "The machine and man-as-machine," Prinz writes, "is a central feature of their art as well; Duchamp and Beckett generate images of mechanical

systems—human, logical, and linguistic—that function but do not ‘work.’”<sup>111</sup> The mechanical compositional principles detectible in *Endgame* certainly could be read in relation to these aspects of Duchamp’s work, whereas so far the play has only been read in relation to Duchamp’s writings on chess.<sup>112</sup> What interests me, however, is the joke underlying Belacqua’s theorizing. Absolutely nothing is at stake: Belacqua has not even written anything yet. His hyperactivity as he climbs about in the rigging underscores that his comic hyper-intellectualism merits little serious attention. A similar point might be made about Hamm’s “poem.” Hamm sets up an expectation that it will offer a final, grand expression of his suffering, yet all he ultimately manages is a very brief, loose adaptation of someone else’s work. Such self-aggrandizement and outrageous attribution of significance to off-the-cuff remarks and outright borrowings find affiliations with Duchamp’s clowning interventions into the reception of his readymades.

As I have already noted, the scandal around *Fountain* seems largely to have been manufactured by *The Blind Man*, but it is a manufactured scandal that seems to have played a large role in cultivating Duchamp’s current status as a seminal figure in modern art,<sup>113</sup> and it is one that seems to have been orchestrated largely by Duchamp himself. In the May 1917 issue of *The Blind Man*, Louise Norton, likely under the direction of Duchamp, writes of *Fountain*, “There

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<sup>111</sup> Prinz, “The Fine Art of Inexpression: Beckett and Duchamp,” in *Beckett Translating / Translating Beckett*, ed. Alan Warren Friedman, Charles Rossman, and Dina Sherzer (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), 95.

<sup>112</sup> See Hugill, “Opposition and Sister Squares.” By way of introduction, Hugill also notes how Duchamp’s work on chess could inform earlier works such as *Murphy* and *Eleutheria*.

<sup>113</sup> Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, and David Hopkins argue that “[a] conceptual view of art has various strands and sources in Duchamp’s work and writings” and that “the readymades and their offshoots” have been “of most lasting impact.” William A. Camfield finds *Fountain* important enough to dedicate a full-length study to it alone. Rosalind Krauss argues that Duchamp sets the major precedent for postmodernist concerns with the idea of the unified self, an argument taken up by later scholars such as Amelia Jones, who claims that Duchamp’s work contains the seeds of postmodernism. Ades, Cox, and Hopkins, *Marvel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 7. Camfield, *Marvel Duchamp: Fountain*. Krauss, “Notes on the Index, Part 1,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 196–209. Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On the manufactured nature of the scandal surrounding *Fountain*, see Walter Hopps, introduction to Camfield, *Marvel Duchamp: Fountain*, 7.



are those who anxiously ask, ‘Is he serious or is he joking?’ Perhaps both! Is it not possible?’<sup>114</sup>

The same question, I think, could be asked of Norton’s (or possibly Duchamp’s) piece: is it a serious attempt at art criticism, or is it a pranking attempt to defer more serious lines of inquiry? When dealing with an avant-garde-cum-mainstream artist such as Duchamp, it seems appropriate to remain attentive to both. It is logical to expect an avant-garde artist to evade serious commentary, but it is equally logical to address seriously the implications of that evasion given the major status he has acquired.

The same considerations might be applied to Beckett’s own coded attempts to steer the reception of his work given his status as both outsider experimentalist and canonical man of letters. Jean du Chas, recall, is described in “Le Concentrisme” as a “biconvex Buddha,” an epithet similar to Norton’s description of Duchamp as the “Buddha of the bathroom.” This similarity, combined with the similarity between the names du Chas and Duchamp, suggests that Duchamp may indeed have influenced Beckett’s thinking in “Le Concentrisme,” in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (in which du Chas makes an appearance), and throughout his later work and career. As I will show, writers operating under Duchamp’s influence lauded *Fountain* in exaggeratedly grandiose terms that suggest comic intentions, and the importance that Beckett’s apparent authorial avatars attach to nicely put phrases within his work might also be informed by an underlying sense of irony.

### **Dreams of Infinite Deferral**

The inevitability of that search is implied in a scene in *Dream* that depicts what seems to be an ideal mode of reading. This scene is unrelated to the narrative surrounding it and seems to offer a flash vision of an impossible ideal:

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<sup>114</sup> Louise Norton, “Buddha of the Bathroom,” *The Blind Man* 2 (May 1917): 6. On Duchamp’s probable influence over this piece, see Camfield, *Marvel Duchamp: Fountain*, 39–40.

[Belacqua's] father [...] turned on the book, connected up, and it did the rest. That was the way to read—find out the literary voltage that suits you best and switch on the current of the book. [...] The wretched reader takes off his coat and squares up to the book, squares up to his poetry like a cocky little hop-me-thumb, hisses up his mind and pecks and picks wherever he smells a chink. And the old corduroy mode, when you switched on and put in the plug and dropped everything, let yourself go to the book, [...] once gone is gone forever. Except with luck on certain occasions that may bring it back. [...] In winter, in the country, at night, in bad weather, far from the cliques and juntas. But his father had never lost it. [...] If you asked him next day what the book was like he could not tell you. (*DFMW*, 53–54)

This idealized mode of reading shares several characteristics with the idealized mode of creative composition depicted through Hamm's compositions and theorized in Belacqua's moments of inspiration. Belacqua's father succumbs to the flow of mechanical operations without the assumption that his impressions must amount to a meaningful structure.

According to this passage, the ideal mode of reading is lost only when the reader allows reason to steer reading towards a single, end-stopped interpretation. That the father does not allow his rational mind to interfere with his reading process is apparent in his inability to paraphrase what he reads. It is also important to note, however, that just as the narrator of the night sky passage interjects "if only we thought so!," so the narrator of this scene bemoans the rarity of the "old corduroy mode." Far more common than this idealized reader, the narrator implies, is the "wretched reader" who "squares up to the book" as one would "square up" to a challenging but ultimately solvable mathematical problem. It is in an effort to combat this interpretative approach that Belacqua and Hamm both claim their privileged position behind the work and insist on their critical blindness even from within that privileged position—a position perhaps analogous to Beckett's dual status as a mainstream and avant-garde author. For them,

this paradoxical insistence guarantees that the work possesses absolutely no consistent, meaningful structure. In the terms of the theory articulated in *Dream*, it guarantees that the work is properly experienced as artistic expression.

An audience that would categorically refuse to interpret is also a Dadaist dream. In his 1918 manifesto, Tzara notes a tendency for audiences to expect too much coherence in a work of art, but he seems to recognize that this is unavoidable. Although “[f]or its creator [the world transposed in art] has neither cause nor theory,” and although “it is neither specified nor defined in the work,” Tzara ultimately allows that “it belongs, in its innumerable variations, to the spectator” (7). He seems to be noting something similar to what Bürger notes, that even the most seemingly meaningless work can be always be interpreted. Yet not all artists associated with Dada were willing to allow this. In *The Blind Man*, in another piece likely influenced by Duchamp’s direct input, is an intervention into what are described as misguided responses to *Fountain*:

Whether Mr. Mutt [Duchamp’s pseudonym] with his own hands made the fountain or not is of no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.<sup>115</sup>

The haughty tone of this letter certainly contrasts comically with the cynical nature of the act of submitting a signed urinal to an art exhibition. Nevertheless, it insists that “Mr. Mutt” does indeed control and craft his work insofar as he selects it and creates a new thought for it. This is an oblique intervention: the nature of the “thought” is never really specified, unless it is merely the idle thought that a urinal turned on its side resembles a fountain. It even seems deliberately

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<sup>115</sup> “The Richard Mutt Case,” 5. On Duchamp’s probable influence over this piece, see Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp: Fountain*, 37–39.

oblique, for to explicate the thought would be to make the work more palatable to the very audience whom Duchamp ostensibly aimed to outrage.

In a sense, Duchamp's commentary on *Fountain* almost becomes part of the work itself. The same would be the case for his notes for his work *The Large Glass* (1915–23), which he would publish in a collection titled *The Green Box*. As Calvin Tomkins reports, “Duchamp thought [*Large Glass*] should be approached [...] as an equal mixture of verbal and visual concepts.”<sup>116</sup> The comments contained in *The Blind Man* and *The Green Box* might even be considered “delays” in the sense in which Duchamp uses the term to refer to *The Large Glass*:

Use “delay” instead of picture or painting [to refer to this work]; picture on glass becomes delay in glass—but delay in glass does not mean picture on glass—

It's merely a way of succeeding in no longer thinking that the thing in question is a picture—to make a delay of it in the most general way possible, not so much in the different meanings in which delay can be taken, but rather in their indecisive reunion

“delay”— / a delay in glass as you would say a poem in prose or a spittoon in silver[.]<sup>117</sup>

The oblique terms in which these interventions are articulated seem only to introduce new ambiguities to the work rather than to resolve existing ones. Similar tactics are used by Belacqua and Hamm, who use their own delaying tactics in their interventions into interpretations of the work they produce, which find resonances with Beckett's public interventions into the reception of his work.

For example, when Belacqua accuses one of his readers of interpreting his work too literally and insists on his own conception of literary incoherence, that insistence leads only to

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<sup>116</sup> Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (London: Pimlico, 1996), 4.

<sup>117</sup> Duchamp, “Kind of Subtitle: *Delay in Glass*,” note from *The Green Box*, in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (1934; New York: Da Capo, 1973), 26.

further interpretative questions. In a particularly defensive mode, after the Alba assesses one of his poems as “too clever,” Belacqua launches into a diatribe that rejects in quasi-mystical terms the Alba’s entire method of reading:

There is a shortness of poetic sight [...] when the image of the emotion is focussed before the verbal retina; and a longness of same, when it is focussed behind. There is an authentic trend from that short-sightedness to this long-sightedness. Poetry is not concerned with normal vision, when word and image coincide. I have moved from the short-sighted poem of which you speak to a long-sighted one of which I now speak. Here the word is prolonged by the emotion instead of the emotion being gathered into and closed by the word. (*DFMW*, 170–71)

Belacqua conceives of his poem as a mixture of visual and verbal concepts, but the relations between those concepts are constantly shifting. The incoherence of this explanation might even cast it as poetic in its own right, yet this does not deter the Alba from literal analysis. She seeks to eradicate uncertainties within the very terms in which Belacqua discourages her from seeking to eradicate uncertainties: “*Verbal retina* [...] I don’t get. Can a word have a retina?” (*DFMW*, 171). Belacqua has introduced new problems into the interpretation of his work rather than solving existing ones, but it seems clear that he cannot avoid indefinitely the Alba’s desire for resolution.

This same pattern is depicted in the power struggles of *Endgame*, in which Hamm is also confronted with readings of his compositions that he considers to be fatally misguided. During his “story time,” for example, Hamm delivers a narrative that, like the final line of his translation of Baudelaire, seems as reliant on conventions and accidents of genre and language as it is on personal meaning or intention. After a brief exposition in a “narrative tone,” he reverts to his “normal tone” to comment, “That should do it,” which implies that his exposition has been dictated mainly by the convention that a story ought to have an exposition. He relishes in retrospect the pleasing or displeasing aural qualities of his turns of phrase: he utters his first

“nicely put” when admiring the consonance in “down among the dead,” and he later complains, “There’s English for you,” bemoaning the absence of consonance in the second half of “present your petition and let me resume my labours” (*CDW*, 117).<sup>118</sup> All of this is done in a way that also reflects a personal connection to Hamm’s situation, as the phrase “down among the dead” exemplifies. Yet Hamm’s interlocutors respond only once to his story, when Nagg visibly reacts to the mention of “a nice pot of porridge” (*CDW*, 118). Nagg fails to appreciate the aural qualities of the story that for Hamm are paradoxically as essential as its semantic qualities. Just as “a nice pot of porridge” would only delay rather than permanently stave off starvation, so Hamm’s own tacit reliance on contradictory (non-)principles can only temporarily forestall conclusive interpretation.

Confrontation with this same impasse is evaded, delayed, when Hamm begins to relay his “chronicle” to Clov and becomes dismayed by what he perceives to be Clov’s too-literal interpretation of it. Here Hamm’s quasi-poetic comments on his own composition again prove as incapable as Belacqua’s to defer interpretative resolution indefinitely. The irony latent in the term “chronicle” is significant, for what Hamm really offers is a narrative—with a beginning, middle, and presumably, an eventual end—that clearly contains some aspects of fiction. Hamm toys with different expository first lines (“It was an extra-ordinarily bitter day, [...] zero by the thermometer”; “It was a glorious bright day [...] fifty by the heliometer”; “It was a howling wild day [...] a hundred by the anemometer”; “It was an exceedingly dry day [...] zero by the hygrometer”), and he revels in various clichés (“Seasonable weather, for once in a way”; “What ill wind blows you my way?”; “He took the plunge”; “Not a sinner”; “I wasn’t much longer for this world”) (*CDW*, 117–18). His preoccupation with exposition and ready turns of phrase contrast with the actual content of his story, which indeed seems to record real events as it describes a man begging Hamm for food for his starving son. Clov focuses squarely on literal

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<sup>118</sup> This inverts tone of the French “Ça c’est du français!,” which illustrates Hamm’s satisfaction with the consonance in his line, “[M]ille soins m’appellent.” Beckett, *Fin de partie*, 72.

content. After Hamm offers a brief exposition of his theory that the author must not engage in “forcing” (“it’s fatal”), that there is “nothing [the author] can do about it, just wait for it to come,” he finds the first line of his story, “He comes crawling in on his belly,” immediately interrupted by what he considers an impertinent question: “Who? [...] What do you mean, he?” (CDW, 121). Hamm’s response to Clov—“What do I mean! Yet another” (CDW, 121)—is vague and epigrammatic, yet just as Belacqua, despite his best goading, fails to arouse in the Alba an experience rooted in the intervals rather than the terms of his statements, so too does Hamm fail to arouse in Clov the passive receptiveness he desires. Clov’s sarcastic response, “Ah, him,” demonstrates that he feels he sees through Hamm’s tactics, that Hamm’s desire to deflect Clov’s real-world concerns, but to keep him seriously receptive to his tale, is doomed ultimately to fail—and it should be noted that such receptiveness would entail a morally dubious indifference to human suffering.

The many resonances between Tzara’s, Duchamp’s, *Dream*’s, and *Endgame*’s attempts to shape their own reception suggest that particular caution be taken when weighing Beckett’s own comments on *Dream* and *Endgame*. The principles underlying the composition of both pieces seem to have been muddled indeed, and neither suggests Beckett’s absolute control or absolute lack of control. *Dream* may indeed be conceived as a chest into which Beckett threw wild thoughts, for the most obvious principle seemingly underlying the work is one of absolute inclusiveness based on an authorial refusal to judge or elide disparate passages and reflections. Yet there is also a clear effort to massage these disparate passages into coherence: the night sky passage, after all, seems to take a cue from Belacqua looking at the night sky. Conversely, there may indeed be a few accidents in *Endgame* despite Beckett’s insistence to the contrary. The seemingly endless series of drafts relating to *Fin de partie*, *Endgame*, and *Endspiel* suggest that the play is in danger of meeting the same fate as *Dream*, of becoming a ragbag of events and themes irreducible to an overarching plan or vision. By extension, it seems reasonable to suspect that

Beckett's comments on his other works might at times be similarly misleading or skewed towards encouraging potential interpreters to give up the search for interpretative resolution.

Such encouragement may have seemed particularly necessary during Beckett's lifetime, for early interpreters of *Endgame* were keen to find hidden meanings within the minutiae of the play's diction. In 1969, for example, Stanley Cavell claimed that that the *Endgame's* dialogue contains a "*hidden literality*" designed to "unfix clichés and idioms" and eliminate "noncognitive" linguistic properties such as "connotation, rhetoric, [...] the irrationality and awkward memories of ordinary language."<sup>119</sup> According to Cavell's reading, when Clov asks, "What in God's name could there be on the horizon?"—a question Cavell misattributes to Hamm—the phrase "in God's name" is not a curse but a literal invocation of God: Clov is asking "whether anything on the horizon is appearing in God's name, as his sign or at his bidding" (120; see also *CDW*, 107). Consider, too, a newspaper article that Ernst Schröder published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* to mark the 1967 revival of *Endspiel*, directed by Beckett and starring Schröder as Hamm. Schröder seems deeply influenced by Beckett's admonitions against interpreting Hamm's lines too liberally: "I could only do what was musically correct," he writes. Yet Schröder cannot help but voice a relatively liberal interpretation of the names of the play's characters: "Whoever has read Adorno or Esslin [knows that] *Hamm* is an abbreviation of the German word *Hammer*, *Clov* the French *clou*, a nail. [...] *Nagg*, abbreviation of the German *Nagel* [nail], *Nell* comes from the English *nail*."<sup>120</sup> Although Beckett never seems to have commented on this interpretation—which is present in numerous accounts of *Endgame*—it seems likely he would have described it as reductive, for it goes against his insistence that audiences should avoid searching for riddles and solutions in his play.

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<sup>119</sup> Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 119–20.

<sup>120</sup> Ernst Schröder, "Proben mit Beckett," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 November 1967. My translation and italics. In fact, the author of this observation is A. J. Leventhal; it appears in a volume edited by Martin Esslin. See Leventhal, "The Beckett Hero," in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 50.



## Conclusion

I have suggested that *Endgame*, like *Dream* and, I think, many of Beckett's other works, encourages the exact opposite type of reading than that in which Schröder, and in his own idiosyncratic way, Cavell, engage. *Endgame*'s clichés, idioms, and aphoristic turns of phrase might be read as readymades foregrounding the non-propositional qualities of "ordinary language" in a way that would discourage a search for literal statements or intellectual certainties. Beckett laments in the *Examination* that English is "abstracted to death," and vaguely oxymoronic phrases such as "[n]othing is funnier than unhappiness"—which reportedly constituted the "most important" line of *Endgame* for Beckett (Knowlson, 396)—might even be seen as attempts to beat a dead horse. This is still an interpretation, however. Although it offers a different way of reading *Endgame*'s turns of phrase, the type of reading I am describing would ultimately reinforce Cavell's conclusion that the play demonstrates, despite its best efforts, "the total, even totalitarian, success" of meaning (117). Such conclusions can only be forestalled, never wholly prevented, which might explain why Beckett's responses to those expectations tended to be articulated in oblique ways that delay interpretation rather than determining it—hence his apparent contentment to say that he "never thought of Hamlet when [he] invented [the name *Hamm*]" without specifying where the name actually came from (quoted in Knowlson, 479).

The characteristically elliptical nature of Beckett's most-quoted comments on his works might explain why, in Beckett studies, his words have taken on an authorized status analogous to that of the work itself. It is tempting to view the very categories of work and commentary in terms of *Dream*'s self-reflexive description of its own component parts:

They are no good from the builder's point of view, firstly because they will not suffer their systems to be absorbed in the cluster of a greater system, and then, and chiefly, because they themselves tend to disappear as systems. Their centres are wasting, [...] a

little more and they explode. Then, to complicate things further, they have odd periods of recueillement, a kind of centripetal backwash that checks the rot. (*DFMW*, 119)

Beckett's comments on his work are not clearly separable from the work itself, perhaps in the same way that Duchamp's notes on *Glass* are not strictly separable from *Glass*.

It might be more appropriate to treat Beckett's work of self-interpretation with all the circumspect methodology employed when approaching his writing, including the caveats about expecting too much straightforwardness or coherence. Stephen John Dilks has done some research in this direction, analyzing the "self-conscious invention and marketing of Beckett's authorial persona in the context of his unrelenting examination of the process of image-construction and self-representation in his work."<sup>121</sup> Yet Dilks views these strategies only in relation to "the business of literature" (6). They could also be viewed in a way similar to the way in which Dadaist self-presentational strategies have been viewed: namely, as artistic—or as anti-artistic—or perhaps both.

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<sup>121</sup> Dilks, *Samuel Beckett in the Literary Marketplace*, with a foreword by S. E. Gontarski (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 6.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Productive Impasses: Value in the Postwar Writing**

If Beckett's dealings within the business of literature are complicated by his own drive to particular forms of self-presentation, the converse is also true—the content of his work is not wholly separable from economic concerns. These are manifested particularly forcefully in the themes of penury and valuelessness that become salient in his writing in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, which is commonly seen as the period during which a new aesthetic emerges. The characters that appear in works composed during this time seem destitute in a much more extreme way than their predecessors: Mercier and Camier, Molloy and Malone, Vladimir and Estragon, the narrators of the novellas and the narrator of *The Unnamable* all have very little income and very few possessions. If critics such as Stephen Watt and Declan Kiberd see such “tramps” as quintessentially Beckettian, it might be because they arise so prominently in works that have themselves acquired a pivotal position in Beckett's canon.<sup>122</sup> Beckett's reported artistic revelation by his mother's deathbed took place in 1945, and the subsequent “siege in the room” that produced some of his most famous works was to last for at least the rest of the

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<sup>122</sup> Watt, *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing*, 6–7. Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 14.

decade, two facts that seem to have led critical studies such as John Pilling's *Beckett before Godot* to view the works written immediately after the war as representative of a crucial turn in Beckett's oeuvre.

It seems appropriate, then, that scholars should tend to employ economic metaphors when describing what is unique about Beckett's work. Peter Fifield, for example, writes, "[T]he ferocious negation that resounds in Beckett's oeuvre so troubles the basis of value that the valueless becomes valuable, failure becomes success, and each might, at any moment and recursively, turn into its antithesis."<sup>123</sup> What I highlight in this chapter is how closely such recursions between value and valuelessness are related to Beckett's interrogations of the principle of mimesis in his postwar writing. I connect this insight to George Bataille's writings on value, and particularly his 1933 essay "The Notion of Expenditure."<sup>124</sup> I also draw on theoretical work on value and the nature of interpretation, finding that the paradoxical value Beckett assigns to valuelessness is related to an attempt to negotiate, and even obfuscate, the impossibility of rejecting the principle of mimesis altogether. That goal is shown to be fundamental to an ambition to conceive of an ideally inexpressive and uninterpretable work.

Consider, for example, the paradoxes addressed in Beckett's "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," a text that has repeatedly been mined for examinations of Beckett's evolving views about artistic expression during the postwar period. (For better or worse, this is despite its occasional nature and brevity—it was written for a special 1949 issue of Duthuit's *Transition* dedicated to the visual arts, and it contains fewer than three thousand words.)<sup>125</sup> The famous

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<sup>123</sup> Fifield, introduction to "Samuel Beckett: Out of the Archive," ed. Peter Fifield, Brian Radley, and Lawrence Rainey, special issue, *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (November 2011): 674.

<sup>124</sup> Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 116–29; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>125</sup> For a very useful overview of this work, its publication history and its reception history within Beckett studies, and for an fascinating reading of it as an innovative form of criticism rather than as a quasi-manifesto, see Nicholas

vision of an impossible “expression that there is nothing to express” articulated by the critic B, who presumably stands in for Beckett, is generally seen as representative of Beckett’s newfound artistic ambitions. Fifield adopts this view when he describes B’s vision of a work that would not seek to represent anything, one that would succumb involuntarily to vaguely defined external demands as a tapping toe succumbs to the vague demands of rhythm (Fifield 2013, esp. 26–30). It is important to note the rhetoric that B employs over the course of outlining this vision, which suggests a fundamental relationship between economic value and mimetic content. B insists that there is a qualitative difference between being “short” of “world” and “self” and being “without these esteemed commodities.” For B, the “ultimate penury” of the ideal artist—here personified by Bram van Velde—is different in kind from “the mere misery where destitute virtuous mothers may steal stale bread for their starving brats” (*PTD*, 121–22). B associates this misery with the work of artists such as Pierre Tal Coat and Henri Matisse, to whose work he has already ascribed a “prodigious value,” but only a value “cognate with those already accumulated.” Those values are “cognate” by virtue of the fact that they exist on the “plane of the feasible,” also labelled the “field of the possible,” on which the artist can only “[thrust] towards a more adequate expression of natural experience,” with “nature” loosely defined in the terms of the “naïvest realist” as “a composite of perceiver and perceived” (*PTD*, 101–103). “Expression of natural experience” seems to be synonymous with the principle of mimesis, which B views as the fundamental hallmark of traditional conceptions of artistic value.

According to this framework, however, it is impossible to do away with the concept of mimesis. As D points out, even “the expression that there is nothing to express” is still conceivable as a representation of utter ignorance. B responds to D with an unqualified refusal to “turn tail” in same the way that others have “turned wisely tail,” but his petulance only reinforces D’s objection (*PTD*, 121–22). B seems determined to conceive of the ideal artwork as

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E. Johnson, “Performative Criticism: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 9 (December 2013): <arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/johnson.pdf>.

an abstract, independent entity: to borrow Fifield's terms, B wants to think of art as "its own agent, manipulating artist and viewer alike" (Fifield 2013, 26). Yet the arguments B puts forth demonstrate that a work of art, too, is properly conceived as a subjective experience that can always be productively compared with other experiences. Speaking of a hypothetical van Velde painting, for example, B says, "What is this coloured plane, that was not there before[?] I don't know what it is, having never seen anything like it before. It has nothing to do with art, in any case, if my memories are correct" (*PTD*, 126). Even here, van Velde's work is a remembered experience in the mind of B, and it enables B to question what is meant by the concept of art by comparing it with previous experiences of works of art. This is precisely the sort of semantic end-around argument that B has little patience for, but its basic logic seems sound, and it seems applicable not only to visual art but to other genres, as well.<sup>126</sup>

To elucidate why even a work "bereft of occasion" can always be made to yield some mimetic content, it is useful to draw on ideas from Derek Attridge and Charles Taylor about the nature of the work and the inevitability of interpretation. Attridge offers a particularly clear articulation of what it means to conceive of a work as an experience. He describes works of literature as "having [their] existence in the readings, or performances, given to [them]" (24). The term "performance" is deliberately chosen to demonstrate that his argument applies to other "obviously temporal arts" such as music, film, and drama, as well as to less obviously temporal arts such as painting and sculpture, which "have their being as art in the temporal event of being looked at (and perhaps touched)" (27). Taylor, writing more generally about experience, and summing up a philosophical tradition informing the most fundamental ideas of figures such as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Habermas, explains the premise that human beings are incapable of

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<sup>126</sup> Many critics have used the "Three Dialogues," which focus exclusively on painting, to address other art forms. Fifield writes that "[t]he obligation to express, and the impossibility of doing so, spreads across genres" (Fifield 2013, 30). Duncan Chesney uses the "Three Dialogues" to understand the "minimal abstractions of Beckett's great works" and to introduce his analysis of an overall resonance between Beckett's aesthetics and minimalism. Chesney, "Beckett, Minimalism, and the Question of Postmodernism," *Modernism/modernity* 19, no. 4 (November 2012): 644.

not interpreting experience. As Taylor puts it, “Our interpretation of ourselves and our experience is constitutive of what we are, and therefore cannot be considered as [...] separable from reality” (47). Taylor addresses an “obvious counter-example” to his thesis in order to “clarify” it: namely, the apparently “‘objectless’ emotion” of “nameless dread” (48). Here he points out that “the empty slot where the object of fear should be is an essential phenomenological feature of this experience,” arguing that “an essential phenomenological feature of an *experience* is equivalent to an essential feature of it *tout court*” (48). These sorts of ideas are germane to what the “Three Dialogues” attacks, but even B finally implies that they are sound when he admits that he is only arguing for what he is “pleased to fancy,” that in fact the situation is “more than likely [...] quite otherwise” (*PTD*, 123). A work of art, literature, or drama is not an objective entity but a particular unfolding of a reader’s or viewer’s experience. When even the absence of occasion that B identifies in van Velde’s work is itself understood as part of an unfolding experience of that work, then the work can never be separated from an always interpreted reality. What B imagines, or strives to imagine, is something other than that reality.

The link between received conceptions of artistic value and the presence of interpretable mimetic content recurs throughout Beckett’s writing during the postwar period, which suggests that it might be rooted in a particular historical moment. That rootedness was first suggested to me by the work of Andrew Gibson, who has demonstrated how Beckett responded to literary politics over the course of the Gaullist regime in works such as *L’Innommable*, the novellas, and other essays on art.<sup>127</sup> According to Gibson, these ideals merely set up an exchange between writers and the “new France” of the Fourth Republic: writers were encouraged to offer a worldview conducive to humanist values—be they indebted to existential humanism or to a more general “rhetoric of Man”—and those who did so were rewarded with prestige if not

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<sup>127</sup> Gibson, “French Beckett and French Literary Politics, 1945–52,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 103–16; hereafter cited parenthetically.

money (104). Gibson does not examine the piece at length, but the “Three Dialogues” seems also to respond to such systems of transactions with its ironic militaristic rhetoric. When at the beginning of the third dialogue, for example, B intones, “Frenchman, fire first,” his tongue-in-cheek challenge to D likens the very activity of aesthetic valuation to the antiquated gentleman’s activity of dueling, or at least to outmoded forms of warfare, both operating according to codes of honor that must have seemed utterly obsolete after the chaos of two world wars (*PTD*, 119). B’s refusal to “[turn] wisely tail” similarly implies a relation between traditional modes of aesthetic valuation and the legacy of French surrender to, and compromise and collaboration with, occupying German forces.<sup>128</sup> In Beckett’s other postwar texts, the question of value is not always foregrounded and related to that legacy as explicitly as it is in the “Three Dialogues,” but as I will show, much of it does seem to respond to what Beckett portrays as a dominant rhetoric of transaction endemic to the contexts in which he was working.

Such rhetoric might go a long way toward explaining why Beckett’s work does not wholly reject the concept of value, which seems indispensable to the business of writing. Beckett himself certainly was not indifferent to business-related concerns: recent studies by Dilks, Nixon, and others have shown that Beckett was deeply involved in the particulars of publishing, producing, and marketing his work.<sup>129</sup> It can be useful to think about the links between Beckett’s career as a professional writer and his actual writing during this period in terms of Lawrence Rainey’s writing on modernism and the market. According to Rainey, “Modernism marks neither a straightforward resistance nor an outright capitulation to commodification but a momentary equivocation that incorporates elements of both in a brief, necessarily unstable synthesis.”<sup>130</sup>

Rainey’s argument is put forth for definitional purposes, and within Beckett studies it is generally

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<sup>128</sup> For a history of this legacy, see Richard J. Golsan, *Vichy’s Afterlife: History and Counterhistory in Postwar France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

<sup>129</sup> Nixon, ed., *Publishing Samuel Beckett* (London: British Library, 2011). Dilks, *Samuel Beckett in the Literary Marketplace*.

<sup>130</sup> Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 3.



invoked in a biographical vein, but it can also be put to hermeneutic work.<sup>131</sup> Beckett's explorations of the paradoxical interchangeability of value and valuelessness might be understood as a result of equivocations before conflicting imperatives of aesthetic ambitions and commercial realities. Even in the "Three Dialogues," B does not insist that van Velde's painting is utterly valueless. Rather, he suggests the paradoxical possibility that it "stirs from the field of the possible" and gestures towards a radically new form of value. This reluctance to dispense with the concept of value altogether seems to owe something to the fact that Beckett was personally close with both van Velde and Duthuit. B's logic avoids describing art production and criticism as wholly passé industries, and it leaves open the paradoxical possibility that painters such as van Velde and publications such as Duthuit's *Transition* might yet be able to work profitably, if only in impossible directions.

Such considerations resonate with ironies latent within Bataille's notion of expenditure, and as Gibson points out, Bataille is a "significant," if already "familiar," figure "for locating Beckett's writings in the late 1940s" (103). This chapter further explores that already familiar connection, but according to new terms. Scholars have usually focused on Bataille and Beckett's shared interest in figures of negativity and animality.<sup>132</sup> I look instead at instances in Beckett's work in which an apparent superabundance of words or events seems to suggest that none is meaningful, and hence valuable. None seems to bear any significance in itself, and each seems as if it could be expended without doing too much damage to the work as a whole (with "the work as a whole" cast as a suspect category). My emphasis on superabundance may seem strange given

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<sup>131</sup> Rainey suggests the hermeneutic potential of his line of argument, drawing an example from Joyce's *Ulysses*. Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, 7. For invocations of Rainey's argument regarding the biographical details of Beckett's career, see S. E. Gontarski, "Art and Commodity: Samuel Beckett's Commerce with Grove Press," in *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, 140; Peter D. McDonald, "Calder's Beckett," in *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, 154–55; and Dilks, *Samuel Beckett in the Literary Marketplace*, xii, 25, 67.

<sup>132</sup> The generalization about previous scholarship is Peter Fifield's. See Fifield, "Accursed Progenitor!": *Fin de partie* and Georges Bataille," *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui* 22 (2010):118–19; hereafter cited parenthetically. Connor, for example, focuses on resonances between Bataille's work and themes of reduction and constriction in Beckett's later work. Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 71–89.

the theme of penury with which I began: at first glance, that theme might seem to suggest a comparison between Beckett's aesthetics and minimalism, according to which a "spare, taut, and reduced" style would ensure that "the object itself has no meaning," leading to an art "without any regulative criteria of value."<sup>133</sup> Yet various passages in Beckett's postwar writing advertise themselves as excessive, as *non-productive expenditures* (the term is Bataille's and is adduced below). They contravene the utilitarian notion that in works of art, drama, and literature, as in politics, society, and economics, the fewest possible resources ought to be exploited to the greatest possible gain. Instead, these passages often employ an excessive number of resources in order to achieve the least possible gain. The irony is that this embrace of diminishing returns suggests a new value to be found in the very novelty of that embrace.

### **Non-productivity and Artistic Value**

In many of his critical musings, as I have shown, Beckett tends to gesture toward an impossibly unmediated experience of the artwork. In his musings on the rhetoric of transaction underlying postwar debates about artistic value, he relates that imagined experience to a conception of value that is impossibly unmotivated by the concept of gain, be it intellectual or financial. In my reading of these sorts of attitudes in Beckett's work, I take a cue from Pierre Bourdieu's work on taste, which argues that those who extol the virtues of non-productive artistic experiences tend to occupy socially influential positions. Those raised in a "cultured" household, Bourdieu claims, learn to "devalue scholarly knowledge and interpretation" and to favor "direct experience and simple delight."<sup>134</sup> Bourdieu's reading sheds light on the problem Beckett struggles with in the works composed during the postwar period. In them, the striving for direct experience is shown

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<sup>133</sup> Chesney, "Beckett, Minimalism, and the Question of Postmodernism," 645–46.

<sup>134</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (1979; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 2; hereafter cited parenthetically.

to be a striving for something that is always predicated upon the essentially economic principles it hopes to transcend.

A useful starting point for this discussion is a statement similar to Beckett's later rejection of "riddles and solutions" in the *Endspiel* program insert. In this case, Beckett offers an "authorized" (non-)interpretative approach to a 1952 radio broadcast of *En attendant Godot*:

I have no ideas about theatre. I know nothing about it. I do not go to it. That is allowable. What is less so, no doubt, is first of all, in these conditions, writing a play, and then, having done so, having no ideas about it either. This is unfortunately my case. It is not given to everyone to be able to move from the world that opens under the page to that of profit and loss, then back again, unperturbed, as if between the daily grind and the pub on the corner. (*LII*, 316)

As usual, Beckett's pleas of absolute ignorance are less than straightforward here. There is, for example, much evidence that demonstrates the wild inaccuracy of his claim to "have no ideas about theatre."<sup>135</sup> What makes this comment relevant to my present argument, however, is that Beckett directly equates the expectation that he might "have ideas" about his work with a despised world of "profit and loss," a world in which the labor expended on literary composition would presumably yield some value redeemable through an interpretation of the work. Combining his claims of ignorance with the authority that the broadcast of this statement implicitly grants to him as author, Beckett attempts to situate his play outside of this world, adding an anti-economic tinge to his reluctance to explain his work.

These metaphors are what find affinities with ideas put forth by Bataille, a comparison that seems appropriate given that Beckett evidently had a lifelong interest in Bataille's work. Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon have recently discovered Beckett's copy of the 1979 edition of

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<sup>135</sup> See Emilie Morin, "Odds, Ends, Beginnings: Samuel Beckett and Theatre Cultures in 1930s Dublin," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, 209–21.

Bataille's novel *Madame Edwarda*, the preface to which contains "an unusually large number of individual words and phrases [...] underlined in pencil."<sup>136</sup> Fifield identifies another "extant record": namely, "the last page of the first *Textes pour rien* notebook, whose last text is dated July 1951, [in which] Beckett makes a note from Bataille's preface to [de Sade's] *Justine* (1950)" (Fifield 2010, 111–13). Further incidental evidence suggests that the affinities between Beckett and Bataille are more numerous than either of these two texts can indicate. Drawing on publishing histories and Beckett's biography, Fifield suggests that Beckett likely read Bataille's novel *L'histoire de l'oeil* shortly after his return to Paris at the end of the Second World War (116). Beckett took an early interest in *Critique*, a journal founded by Bataille in 1946 and published by Minuit, which would also publish Beckett's trilogy.<sup>137</sup> Bataille would eventually publish an essay on *Molloy* in May 1951, an essay that Beckett would later list as one of the three best responses to the novel (*LII*, 442).<sup>138</sup> Bataille and Beckett would meet in Paris later that month, and Beckett would write Bataille an admiring letter the following month in which he would enclose an extract from the forthcoming *Malone meurt* (*LII*, 258). Beckett, through Bataille's agency, would write to the Princess Caetani on 1 July 1951 to offer her extracts from *Malone meurt* for her *Botteghe Oscure* (*LII*, 261). Beckett would eventually send a signed copy of *En attendant Godot* to Bataille (*LII*, 442). Taken together, these intersections suggest that Beckett was keenly interested in Bataille's ideas by the end of the war and that this interest would last for much of the rest of his life.

For my purposes, what makes this comparison particularly compelling is that like Beckett, Bataille had his own squabbles with certain exclusive groups and movements. He also resisted conforming to groups that in the wake of catastrophe purported to resist dominant conceptions of value, but that (in his view) in fact conformed to them. Bataille's best-known

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<sup>136</sup> Van Hulle and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 80.

<sup>137</sup> This is pointed out by the editors of Beckett's *Letters* (*LII*, 80).

<sup>138</sup> See Bataille, "The Silence of Molloy," trans. Jean M. Sommermeyer, in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 55–63. Originally published as Bataille, "Le Silence de Molloy," *Critique* 48 (15 May 1951): 387–96. All subsequent quotations are derived from the former text, which is hereafter cited parenthetically.

falling-out of this kind is probably his dispute with André Breton and the Surrealist circle. As Fred Botting and Scott Wilson explain, the “idealism and hygienic rationalism” that Bataille detected in the ethos of the Surrealists was for him too similar to “notions of community based on some essence, idea or project, be it organic nature, racial purity, the Fatherland, the body of Christ or the dignity of labour,” notions that especially in the 1930s would be “employed as the goal and guarantee of liberal democratic, socialist and national socialist repressions.”<sup>139</sup> In contrast, Bataille’s College of Sociology, established in 1937, espoused an “impossible goal, the affirmation of a non-realizable and distinctly non-utilitarian ‘universal community.’”<sup>140</sup> Bataille’s notion of excess was germane to his challenge to the closed systems and economic metaphors underpinning ongoing “liberal democratic, socialist and national socialist repressions,” and it is this that resonates interestingly with Beckett’s own rhetoric of resistance to “the world of profit and loss.”

Bataille began to acquire some distance from intellectual cliques around the time of the stock market crash of 1929 (the same year in which Breton’s second manifesto “excommunicated” him), and throughout the 1930s, his critiques of them became increasingly concerned with what he saw as the flawed basis of classical economics. That concern is detectible in embryonic form in a 1930 “open letter” to his “current colleagues” (that is, to the Surrealists). In this piece, Bataille explains that he is opposed to systems of “appropriation,” among which he implicitly counts the ethos of the Surrealist circle alongside “the work of philosophy as well as of science or common sense.” He opposes these because they “have always had as [their] goal the establishment of the homogeneity of the world”; they have always operated according to a singular worldview that appropriates all experience to the furtherance of

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<sup>139</sup> Botting and Wilson, introduction to *The Bataille Reader*, eds. Botting and Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 5–6.

<sup>140</sup> Botting and Wilson, introduction, 6.

a particular ideal.<sup>141</sup> The economic undertones latent within this critique would be made explicit three years later in “The Notion of Expenditure,” which emphasizes that even those who apparently dissent from a dominant capitalist ideology still tend to share in its goal-oriented, utilitarian logic. In this piece, Bataille introduces the concept of “non-productive expenditure,” defined as a “sumptuary loss of ceded objects” and postulated to be the “base” of economic exchange “over which a process of acquisition has developed” (121). Bataille glorifies expenditure in order to challenge what he calls the principle of “the balancing of accounts,” which he alternately glosses as “classical utility,” according to which “all individual effort, in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation” (117). For him, it is not that which is reducible to production and conservation that is valuable. Rather, it is that which is irreducible to such necessities, that which he locates outside of the principle of the balancing of accounts, with the accent falling on loss, waste, excess.

Bataille’s challenge to classical economics is made on a fundamental level. It calls for “a Copernican transformation,” or “a reversal of thinking—and of ethics,” according to which “the possibility of pursuing growth is itself subordinated to giving” (117). It rejects the pursuit of pleasure in what it views as the traditional sense of the concept: “[T]he goal of [material utility] is, theoretically, pleasure—but only in a moderate form, since violent pleasure is seen as *pathological*” (116). Instead, it elevates the figure of the “youthful man” who is “capable of wasting and destroying without reason,” whose behavior ostensibly confirms that “human society can have [...] an *interest* in considerable losses, in catastrophes that [...] provoke tumultuous depressions, crises of dread, and, in the final analysis, a certain orgiastic state” (117).

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<sup>141</sup> Bataille, “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades),” in *Visions of Excess*, 96. This “open letter” would remain unpublished during Bataille’s lifetime.

This embrace of illogical impulses that leads Bataille to his notion of expenditure resonates with the visceral “disgust” that leads B to posit an impossibly illogical form of artistic value. It resonates even more strongly, however, with the comparisons between aesthetic valuation and economic transactions detectible in Beckett’s “La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon” (1945–46), an essay that can in turn provide insights into the works composed during that period.<sup>142</sup> More directly than the “Three Dialogues,” at the levels of occasion and argument, this piece engages with the difficulties of balancing artistic integrity and economic demands. The circumstances of its publication suggest that it likely had its own real-world aims. It was commissioned by *Cahiers d’art* on the occasion of exhibitions of the work of Bram van Velde and his brother Geerardus (Geer) at the Mai and Maeght Galleries in Paris—the latter of which was connected to Bataille (he wrote for their publication *Pierre à Feu*); soon after Beckett’s essay was published, the van Veldes would begin to display their paintings at the Maeght Gallery regularly (*LII*, 64, n. 3). The essay’s central defense of their work is articulated in a manner that resonates with Bataille’s “Notion of Expenditure” and seems obliquely aimed at convincing people such as gallery owner Aimé Maeght to display their work. As Jan K. Birksted explains, “The Maeght gallery was a leading, powerful, adventurous, experimental—at times outrageous—commercial art gallery. [Maeght,] ‘who had revolutionary and anti-bourgeois sympathies, an anti-authoritarian streak,’ naturally supported novelty.”<sup>143</sup> Beckett’s essay stresses the very literal novelty of Bram’s work, described as “particularly little known,” having “so to speak never [left] his studio” (*D*, 123). The essay seems almost to offer a hot tip to small gallery owners such as Maeght when it comments suggestively, “No exhibition, however modest, has ever gathered together in Paris the works of the one or the other” (*D*, 123).

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<sup>142</sup> This essay appears only in the original French in *Disjecta*, and so far no translations have been published. Tim Lawrence has kindly shared his personal English translation with me. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent English-language quotations are drawn from his translation. Page numbers for the corresponding French are cited parenthetically.

<sup>143</sup> Jan K. Birksted, *Modernism and the Mediterranean: The Maeght Foundation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 3. Birksted quotes André Malraux, Maeght Foundation inaugural speech, in Catie Chambon, ed., *La Fondation Marguerite et Aimé Maeght* (Paris: Maeght Editeur, 1994), 48–56. The translation is presumably Birksted’s.

Yet the “anti-bourgeois sympathies” of “adventurous” dealers such as Maeght would also have to be reckoned with, however at odds they may have been with the realities of being a commercial art dealer. This seems to have been a particularly difficult case to make in relation to the van Veldes. Beckett would later imply in the “Three Dialogues” that Bram’s work could indeed be derided as bourgeois: without any particular prompting, B downplays the seriousness of such an accusation, declaring that “the realisation that art has always been bourgeois [...] is finally of scant interest” (*PTD*, 123–24). Yet that realization is certainly of interest for the purposes of “La Peinture des van Velde,” and it seems partially an attempt at pre-empting when the essay identifies anti-values in their work redolent of Bataille’s inversion of classical economics. Like the “Three Dialogues,” this piece dismisses most if not all prior scholarship in the field of the visual arts, but it does so in a way more directly targeted at the concepts of investment and return. Those who engage in the pedantries of periodization and attribution—systems of appropriation, Bataille might say—are described as “men with faces hollowed out by enthusiasms without guarantee, with feet flattened by innumerable stops, with fingers worn away by fifty-franc catalogues” (*D*, 120). These types of appraisal are more motivated by financial concerns than they care to reveal, and the fact that returns are not guaranteed leads to the exhausting, but never exhausted, search for the right investment of time, intellect, and money. According to Beckett’s essay, this search leads only to perpetual misery, as periods and categories are superficial distinctions in constant flux.

In apparent opposition, Beckett’s piece presents an anti- or non-intellectual neophyte who like Bataille’s wanton youthful man resonates particularly strongly with the anti-bourgeois sympathies of dealers such as Maeght. This neophyte is described as “one amateur alone (enlightened)” who “would have saved [criticism]”: “He doesn’t want to teach himself, the swine, nor become any better. He only thinks of his pleasure” (*D*, 120). Crass neophyte figures seem to have held a particular appeal for Beckett during this period—the amateur finds an analog in the



character of the spectator in *Eleutheria*, addressed in the following chapter, who invades the stage and complains of being bored by the play—and these neophytes seem to pursue their own forms of profit in their encounters with works of art. The amateur of this essay is described in suggestively economic terms as the one who could save criticism, who could preserve its value. As much as that insult “the swine” might seem to be attributed with an ironic sneer to intellectual critics, mocking their pretentiousness and condescension, it might also be understood as a sincere critique of the “hedonism of the bourgeois philistines,” as Jean-Michel Rabaté puts it.<sup>144</sup>

The essay offers an alternative to these approaches in claiming, as the “Three Dialogues” would later imply, that an ideal art would escape such reasoning informed by economic interest. Beckett posits instead something called “the impossible,” an anti-value whose very name suggests its inconceivability, but the existence of which is nevertheless insisted upon. Beckett provides only an oblique explanation of this term when he notes that it interferes both with enjoyment and with rational analysis. That line of argument leads to the following, self-imploding description of the “economics of art”:

There is no painting. There are only pictures. They [...] are neither good nor bad. [...] It is in fact a coefficient without interest. For losses and profits have value in the economics of art, where [...] all presence is absence. (*D*, 123; translation slightly modified)<sup>145</sup>

This description applies apparently mutually exclusive concepts to the artwork, describing only what the impossible is not in order to gesture towards what it is: namely, that which is absolutely

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<sup>144</sup> Rabaté, “Bataille, Beckett, Blanchot: From the Impossible to the Unknowing,” *Journal of Beckett Studies* 21, no. 1 (April 2012): 61; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>145</sup> In the French, this enigmatic passage reads as follows: “Il n’y a pas de peinture. Il n’y a que des tableaux. Ceux-ci [...] ne sont ni bons ni mauvais. [...] C’est d’ailleurs un coefficient sans intérêt. Car pertes et profits se valent dans l’économie de l’art, où [...] toute présence [est] absence.”

un-representable in economic terms. The very concepts of waste and loss are disturbed, for given the emphasis on negativity in this passage, it is unclear whether they are desirable.

“La peinture des van Velde” is a minor piece, but it is significant in that it seems to offer relatively unguarded expressions of Beckett’s opinions regarding artistic expression and the necessary conditions for receiving it properly. This is despite, or perhaps because, it can in part be understood as an advertisement for the van Veldes. Yet this is not to say that the piece is bereft of stylistic nuance. As in his interwar criticism, Beckett here suggests the experimental nature of his claims in the act of making them. If the impossible is a value that is indescribable in economic terms, then Beckett can only grope towards a description of it in oblique and convoluted ways. It is in this respect that this short essay, like many of Beckett’s other nonfictional writings, is comparable with his creative work. In both genres, Beckett mingles formal complexity with a relatively straightforward insistence on the irreducibility of that complexity. Throughout much of his fiction and nonfiction, there is constant tension or vacillation between these two poles as Beckett struggles to gesture toward an aesthetic quality that is irreducible to abstraction, universal truths, or intellectual certainties, and that is therefore fundamentally incommunicable. This is not to erase the distinction between Beckett’s fiction and nonfiction, but it is to emphasize that the differences between the two are often a matter of degree rather than of kind, with the fiction geared more heavily toward stylistic convolutedness and the criticism geared more heavily toward insistence on and explication of the irreducibility of that convolutedness.

Such resonances are mapped out further in what follows, but first I would like to spell out how Beckett’s complications of the concepts of loss and profit invite a particular reading of how his methods resonate with Bataille’s ideas. Take, for example, Bataille’s argument that “the principles of classical utility” dictate that “all individual effort, in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation.” Beckett rejects similar

principles dictating that all of the properties of a work of art, in order to be valid, must contribute towards some identifiable payoff, be it intellectual or sensual. This rejection is taken to such an extreme that even the apparent boundaries between categories such as the intellectual and the sensual seem to break down. The implicit complication of the search for pure sensual experience can be understood in the terms of Bataille's rejection of moderate pleasure as the goal of production and conservation. In "La peinture des van Velde," the search for sensual experience also appears to be too moderate, as it maintains the expectation that a work of art ought to yield some benefit outside itself.

Perhaps the clearest way of elucidating the contradictions inherent in Beckett's logic is to draw upon a critique of Bataille's notion of expenditure put forth by Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, who asserts her own indebtedness to Bourdieu's work. Smith argues that value-expectations are inescapable when she hones in on Bataille's valorization of "sumptuary loss," which for her only conforms to the logic that Bataille claims to reverse:

[The pursuit of sumptuary loss does not] represent the pursuit of "*absolute* loss." [...]  
"The reasoning that balances accounts" can always be discerned in [Bataille's] analysis.  
[...] No valorization of anything, even of "loss" itself, can escape the idea of some sort of positivity—that is, gain, benefit, or advantage—in relation to some economy. (136–37)

Smith offers an alternative to Bataille's system, one that suggests that the system of appreciation sketched in Beckett's essay is indeed untenable. Due to the inescapability of the logic of "profit and loss" or of "the balancing of accounts"—in Smith's terms, "discourses of value"—it is necessary instead to "form a corollary conception of economic activity [as opposed to individual expenditures] as having *no* 'end,' neither *telos* nor *terminus*":

All human (and not only human) activity could be seen to consist of a continuous exchange or expenditure [...] of goods of some (but any) kind, whereby goods of some

other (but, again, any) kind are secured, enhanced, or produced. [...] [This applies] everywhere, in every archaic tribe and “modern era,” *endlessly*. (145)

This seems to be the type of economy in which the greedy art collectors described in Beckett’s essay engage. When this type of perpetual exchange is described as perpetual misery, tone—that is, categorical intervention—is substituted for logical argument. For while “positive values” may not be justifiable by any objective standards, they must always exist on an intersubjective level.<sup>146</sup> Smith calls this her theory of generalized or radical positivity, according to which “the concept of ‘good’”—which she glosses alternately as “payoff”—“operates axiomatically within [discourses of value]” (146). In this light, the absence or inaccessibility of intellectual certainties would in no way bar a reader or viewer from drawing value from a certain experience of the work.

“La Peinture des van Velde,” like the “Three Dialogues,” demonstrates the inescapability of the value systems it attempts to subvert, if only by virtue of the categorical and convoluted nature of its refusals. The remainder of this chapter shows how this reluctance to think about artistic expression and reception in terms of investment and return, when it is understood in terms of Bataille’s inversion of ostensibly traditional systems of value, sheds some light on rhetorical and stylistic tools deployed in works such as *Molloy* and *Waiting for Godot*. In these texts in particular, the words printed on the pages of a novel, like the words and gestures of the characters onstage, are presented as serving no useful purpose within any rational schemes. The resonances between “The Notion of Expenditure” and pieces such as the “Three Dialogues”

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<sup>146</sup> This point seems comparable to what Jürgen Habermas calls the level of “communicative rationality.” He invokes this concept in a piece that points out a historical rootedness to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s critique of enlightenment rationality. In Habermas’s terms, Horkheimer and Adorno viewed enlightenment rationality as “an inadmissible *mixture of power and validity*,” in which “[c]ategories of validity [...] are still blended with empirical concepts like exchange, causality, health, substance, and wealth.” As Habermas points out, “It becomes intelligible how the impression could indeed get established in the darkest years of the Second World War that the last sparks of reason were being extinguished [...] and had left the ruins of a civilization in collapse without any hope.” Although this chapter draws on a specifically French context, the writings it analyzes could potentially be considered part of a wider critique launched in the wake of the Great Depression and in light of the growing awareness of Nazi atrocities. Habermas, “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno,” in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 115–17, 129.

and “La peinture des van Velde” seem to encourage applying insights derived from Beckett’s studies of visual art to instances in which Beckett’s work seems to address the theater and literary industries. Bataille’s essay applies its reasoning to multiple forms of artistic expression, describing all of them in terms of “ [non-productive] expenditure” and “creation by means of loss” and reserving his highest praise for the poet as one who “frequently can use words only for his own loss” (120).<sup>147</sup> It is rewarding to seek in Beckett’s work a similar resonance between the impossible anti-values expected of visual art and what is expected of other art forms.

### **Repetition as Expenditure**

Bataille’s 1951 review of *Molloy* suggests how that might be done. Bataille describes Molloy as an “*amorphous* figure of *absence*” through whom flows “an oceanic agitation of words” that amounts to “one expression [...] of movements that go beyond any school.” According to Bataille’s review, the bare existence of Molloy symbolizes how “literature is in the end silence in its negation of meaningful language, but remains what it is, literature” (57–58). This analysis ultimately chimes with the argument that B makes in the “Three Dialogues.” Just as B hollows out the concept of artistic expression by envisioning an art that would express its inability to express, Bataille values the words deployed in literary works (and in *Molloy* in particular) because they ostensibly have no value. They are, according to Bataille, a mere “disguise” for “death”; “a torrent of incongruous words” constitutes a non-productive expenditure that is in excess of the true “silence” that is the impossible aim of literature (58).

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<sup>147</sup> It is worth noting that Bataille’s description of the fate of “the poet,” although it represents a familiar cliché, resonates strongly with the fate of many of Beckett’s own characters, themselves clichés (here I am thinking particularly of Estragon and of Krapp): “[The poet] is often forced to choose between the destiny of a reprobate, who is as profoundly separated from society as dejecta are from apparent life, and a renunciation [of his art] whose price is a mediocre activity, subordinated to vulgar and superficial needs” (120).

Bataille's ideas and terminology have interesting implications for forms of verbal and narrative superabundance in *Molloy* and in other major works of the postwar period such as *Waiting for Godot*. These are arguably two of Beckett's best-known pieces from this time, and both are rife with excesses. Molloy's description of his method of sucking stones, for example, digresses from what he initially identifies as the main thrust of his narrative (his search for his mother); it is precisely the torrents of excessive qualifications and citations that prevent Lucky from concluding his proposition (logorrhea being his only apparent alternative to his usual silence); and further examples are easy to identify. It is particularly interesting to focus on the concept of repetition, however, because of influential interpretations offered by critics such as Connor, who has argued that Beckett's repetitions willfully resist rather than contribute to discourses seeking coherent understandings of the world or of the self.<sup>148</sup> My argument partially relies on his argument in order to demonstrate how Beckett's repetitions resist yielding any coherent mimetic content that could be made to serve enshrined concepts of value.

Repetition begins to undermine the idea that writing must always yield mimetic content right from the start of *Molloy*, when Molloy describes his repetitive weekly routine:

There's this man who comes every week. [...] He gives me money and takes away the pages. So many pages, so much money. [...] When he comes for the fresh pages he brings back the previous week's. [...] When I've done nothing he gives me nothing, he scolds me. Yet I don't work for money. For what then? I don't know. The truth is I don't know much. (*T*, 7)

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<sup>148</sup> In *Repetition, Theory, and Text*, Connor takes issue with critics who view repeated appearances of certain objects, character types, phrases, and allusions in Beckett's corpus as indicative of a certain unity of theme, structure, or effect for which Beckett strives. Instead, he argues that Beckett's repetitions serve to impede rather than cement definitive propositions within his work. More recently, Sarah Gendron has demonstrated the continuing importance of this debate in her refutations of critics who "do not explore the differences that invariably insert themselves between the so-called original event or expression and its copy" and by taking issue with those who "conclude by imagining repetition to be governed by some 'centering' or 'unifying' principle." Gendron, *Repetition, Difference, and Knowledge in the Work of Samuel Beckett, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 139, n. 2; hereafter cited parenthetically.

The assumption that the act of writing can be valued in the same way as any other commodity and is part of a system of transactions arises immediately and is taken to its logical extreme, with Molloy very nearly paid by the word. This is subtly linked to an expectation that, by association, is cast as equally crude: namely, that literature must (or even can) yield any value at all. On the most basic level, Molloy's repetitive routine, pursued for its own sake rather than for the sake of some other ideal, suggests that for him the act of writing exists outside or in excess of any aim at a payoff lying beyond the act of writing itself.

This undermining of the expectation that there is something to be gained from what Molloy writes is suggested most directly by Molloy's claim, "The truth is I don't know much." This claim raises the possibility that Molloy's text bears little relation to natural experience at all and thus would seem to offer little in the way of redeemable value. If the novel is read as an exercise in autography, that possibility is reinforced when Molloy says, "What I'd like to do now is to speak of the things that are left, say my goodbyes, finish dying. They don't want that. Yes, there is more than one, apparently" (*T*, 7). Molloy wishes ultimately to escape his endless exchange of pages for money, and the word "apparently" suggests that even his account of his present situation might be worthless insofar as it might refer to nothing outside of the very words he writes. At the most obvious level, that "apparently" implies that the "man who comes every week" has told Molloy that there is "more than one," which would cast Molloy's account as little more than hearsay. "Apparently" could even indicate a more extreme divorce between reality and what Molloy writes: it seems possible that Molloy discovers that "there is more than one" only after re-reading the sentence, "They don't want that." He may learn of the "others" solely from the fact that he has just re-read the plural pronoun "they." This interpretation may seem fanciful, but it is reinforced by a similar emphasis on the word *offenbar* (also "apparently" or "obviously") in the German version of the trilogy, which Beckett edited carefully after first

translations were made by Erich Franzen and Elmar Tophoven.<sup>149</sup> Consider, for example, the following lines in *Der Namenlose*: “Kann ich von der tadellosen Ordnung, die bis jetzt an diesem Ort herrschte, darauf schließen, daß es immer so sein wird. Ich kann es offenbar.”<sup>150</sup> This appears in *The Unnamable* as follows: “From the unexceptionable order which has prevailed here up to date may I infer that such will always be the case? I may of course” (*T*, 294). In *L’Innommable*, that final line is, “Je le peux évidemment.”<sup>151</sup> In all three instances, the narrator seems content to note that a particular conclusion can clearly be drawn, with the question of its validity totally elided.

If this interpretation still seems too far-fetched, consider another, subtler invocation of the concept of repetition at the beginning of *Molloy*, one that similarly seems to gesture towards the hollowness of literary representation by granting a comically unjustified value to what is only apparent. Towards the end of the novel’s opening paragraph, Molloy indicates that he has already written a beginning other than the one that appears printed on the page. This other beginning seems to have been thrown away by the man who “comes to see” him (the original was “all wrong”). Of this scrapped “original,” Molloy writes, “I began at the beginning, like an old ballocks, can you imagine that?” (*T*, 8). It is not to the original but to the repetition that Molloy grants value: “Here’s my beginning. Because they’re keeping it apparently. [...] It must mean something, or they wouldn’t keep it” (*T*, 8). Molloy’s claim for the value of this beginning is undermined by his reliance on a circular logic whose premise—that writing must be “worth something” to merit being reproduced—remains unjustified. Indeed, this second beginning seems at least as worthless as the first ostensibly was, for it announces little more than its own existence. It is analogous to the hypothetical van Velde painting described in the “Three

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<sup>149</sup> For an idea of just how willing Beckett was to quibble with his translators over diction, see Beckett, letter to Franzen, 17 February 1954, in *Babel 3*, ed. K.A. Perryman (Munich: Babel Verlag, 1984), 28. See also Tophoven’s account of working with Beckett in Beckett, *Der Namenlose*, trans. Elmar Tophoven and Samuel Beckett (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1959), 177–79.

<sup>150</sup> Beckett, *Der Namenlose*, 11.

<sup>151</sup> Beckett, *L’Innommable* (1953; Paris: Minuit, 2004), 12.



Dialogues”—the “coloured plane” that is merely “there”—which according to the idealistic logic of B is outside the scope of economic metaphor. Molloy’s imagined readers seem to be exhorted toward their own confrontation with a bare object that both invites and repels intellectual investment. Like the “Three Dialogues” and “La peinture des van Velde,” the novel mocks those who would bring predetermined value schemes to bear on artistic expression. It dispenses quickly with the usual formalities of exposition, refusing to offer much specific background on Molloy, with the implication that such conventions are utterly antiquated and their persistence little more than an annoyance. Simultaneously, however, the novel suggests a new, albeit undefined, value in its parody of those antiquated conventions.

In the terms of Bataille’s essay on *Molloy*, the bare existence of this printed beginning, finally asserted in the line “[h]ere it is,” seems insubordinate to or not productive within any greater thematic or philosophical scheme. That is, it seems to represent nothing in the most literal, everyday sense. Both the original, unprinted beginning, presumably consigned to the trash can, and this second, printed beginning are presented as wastes of words and energy that serve no purpose other than to allow Molloy to “finish dying.” The expenditure of energy, through writing or otherwise, resonates with what Bataille, in “The Notion of Expenditure,” calls the need for “limitless loss” (123). Later in the novel, Moran highlights that the very act of narrating past events as a form of repetition, a re-living that is utterly pointless. He does so in a moment in which he breaks off from his narrative:

In describing this day I am once more he who suffered it, who crammed it full of futile anxious life, with no other purpose than his own stultification and the means of not doing what he had to do. And as then my thoughts would have none of Molloy, so tonight my pen. (*T*, 122)

It is unclear whether Moran’s “stultification” results from his narration of “this day,” from his initial experience of it, or from both. What is clear, however, is that neither can serve any

purpose other than to “stultify” his pursuit of the enlightenment he seeks—namely, to “see about Molloy” (*T*, 92). Moran’s thoughts that day, like his recount of them in writing “tonight,” remain utterly extraneous to the task at hand, incapable of driving the story forward.

Critics have addressed how inconsistencies within Beckett’s repetitions have contributed to this sense of a story that does not progress, and they have generally understood those inconsistencies in terms redolent of those Bataille uses to explain his notion of expenditure (but without citing Bataille). As Connor nicely formulates it in his analysis of chronological convolutedness across the first and second halves of *Molloy*, “The problem is not so much that the novel doesn’t give us enough material as that it gives us too much, allowing us to believe both that Moran becomes Molloy, and that Molloy’s adventures precede Moran’s” (57). Both Connor and Gendron conclude that these sorts of complications lead to a heightened appreciation of how Beckett’s work engages with the complexities of repetition and difference. Yet the observation that there is “too much” material for interpretative resolution might be taken at face value: it might be taken as a strategy of providing excessive information that is insubordinate to the constraints imposed by the demands of linear narrative.<sup>152</sup> It is not necessary to engage in any lengthy disentangling of chronology in order to conclude that Beckett’s repetitive structures will yield little or no value to attempts to glean any coherent form from them.

In *Waiting for Godot*, this is the attitude espoused by Estragon, who has little patience for any lengthy disentangling of inconsistencies within the Bible. Estragon’s lack of interest in “Gospel truth” is particularly relevant to discourses of artistic value, since for believers the book represents what might be described as the literary work *par excellence*, a code pointing the way to

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<sup>152</sup> Marie Smart has shown that Beckett’s use of convoluted narrative chronologies resonates with the emergence of the “new novel” in postwar France, a development that she sees as explicitly opposed to the existential humanism of figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. See Marie Smart, “New Novel, Old Tune: Beckett and Pinget in Postwar France,” *Modernism/modernity* 21, no. 2 (April 2014): 529–46.

the fountain and logos of all meaning and value. While Vladimir's hyper-rational identification of inconsistencies between the Gospels might seem to border on religious heresy, it is only in Estragon's flippant attitude that the search for truth and value seems to be wholly abandoned:

VLADIMIR: How is it—this is not boring you I hope—how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. [...] One out of four. Of the other three two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him. [...] But one of the four says that one of the two was saved.

ESTRAGON: Well? They don't agree, and that's all there is to it. (*CDW*, 14–15)

The exchange comes shortly after Estragon has announced (while indicating his rags) that he used to be a poet, and his response here seems appropriate to his former occupation (*CDW*, 14). Unlike Vladimir, Estragon entertains no notion that the Bible can be made to yield a coherent truth. While Vladimir unreflectively assumes that biblical repetitions will yield a certain mimetic value—namely, an indication of the likelihood that he will be “saved,” which according to his calculations would stand at 12.5%—Estragon treats inconsistencies in the text in a manner that seems to rest on the belief that it is all trash, unworthy of serious attention.

Estragon's memories of reading the Bible center not around what most would consider the main part of the scriptures but around the section that most would consider expendable. “I remember the maps of the Holy Land,” he reminisces, “Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty” (*CDW*, 13). Estragon inverts Vladimir's system of analysis. He does grant value to the Bible, but not because he presumes that he can extract any information from it. Rather, like the amateur of “*La peinture des van Velde*,” Estragon values the book for the physical sensation he garners from it, focusing on a section that would seem to be in excess of the book proper. In the context of Beckett's warnings against searching for “riddles and solutions” in his own work, Estragon's overdeveloped sensory

memory might seem preferable to Vladimir's hyper-rational approach to biblical interpretation, but as the following section will emphasize, approaches such as his still seek residues of mimesis in order to ascribe a rationally conceived value to the work—indeed, Estragon's line, "That's where we'll go for our honeymoon," reveals his own particularly crass attempt to draw a travel tip from what might otherwise be a purely aesthetic experience (*CDW*, 13). Within *Waiting for Godot* and *Molloy*, as in the "Three Dialogues" and "La peinture des van Velde," the striving for pure sensation is treated as a striving for yet another value that could be sought in art, another search for a payoff within an intellectually driven, value-oriented mindset. This applies even when the value sought is a representation of something like "the irrationality of pi," which Beckett uses as a metaphor for the radical irreducibility or unintelligibility of experience (*PTD*, 125).

### **Productive Inattention**

Connor, Trezise, and Gendron all remain sensitive to the fact that they draw their own critical paradigms from Beckett's work, even when those paradigms advance the argument that coherent critical paradigms cannot be drawn from Beckett's work. Such paradoxes, it seems, must simply be accepted, and this attitude of acceptance seems to be recommended in much of Beckett's writing during the postwar period, be it fictional or nonfictional. Consider, for example, an instance in which Beckett describes his mode of reading in a letter to Hans Naumann dated 17 February 1954:

I have always been a poor reader, incurably inattentive, on the lookout for an elsewhere. And I think I can say, in no spirit of paradox, that the reading experiences which have affected me most are those that were best at sending me to that elsewhere. (*LII*, 465)

Beckett seems eager to strike a down-to-earth tone here. Yet he again seems a bit disingenuous: the copious reading notes he left behind point to anything but an “inattentive reader,” and his declared wish to avoid a “spirit of paradox” does not eliminate a paradox that is indeed inherent in his logic.<sup>153</sup> On the one hand, the idea of being sent “elsewhere” seems related to a reading experience in which a reader surrenders his or her cognitive faculties and succumbs to inattentiveness, declining to search for any payoff in the work itself. In this letter, Beckett implies that he aims to inspire this experience through his own works: unlike Vladimir, that is, he might hope to bore his audience. On the other hand, however, Beckett nudges Naumann towards actively seeking and then embracing the sensation of being sent “elsewhere.” Naumann would still approach the book as a means to an end, as something that can yield a particular value.

As in other correspondence and critical musing, in this letter Beckett offers categorical interventions in the form of tone and uses cryptic, evasive diction in a way that suggests a keen awareness of the limitlessness—and inescapability—of the human drive to understand experience within coherent frameworks. According to “The Notion of Expenditure,” this is only an unfortunate but overriding tendency in “common awareness”; Bataille does not include it within what he conceives as the limitless desire for loss, which for him is always inclined towards the extremes of catastrophe or glory (116). Yet since for Bataille the tendency to rationalize is fundamentally misguided, it could presumably be characterized as yet another form of loss or waste, a constant, compulsive expenditure of excess mental energy. These are the terms in which the drive to interpret is conceived in *Godot* and *Molloy*, and this drive forms a major preoccupation of the rest of Beckett’s trilogy, culminating in *The Unnamable*. This endless drive to comprehend might be what Beckett’s repetitions aim to deflect: they might strive to inspire a certain inattentiveness or boredom that would send an audience’s inquisitive tendencies “elsewhere,” away from the minutiae of the work. That deflection, in turn, could make room for

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<sup>153</sup> For an idea of the sheer volume of notes and marginalia Beckett left behind, see Van Hulle and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s Library*.

a more visceral experience of the passing time that Sara Crangle has defined as “the primary companion of the bored, a time defined by a particularly stagnant present, one divorced from past and future, monstrously inverted, infinite.”<sup>154</sup> This experience seems very close to a non-productive experience emptied of all content, yet like Beckett’s concept of being on the lookout for an elsewhere, it is impossible to achieve totally, for as Adam Phillips has pointed out, even boredom can be understood as “the wish for a desire.”<sup>155</sup>

A self-defeating longing for an absence of desire is dramatized in *Waiting for Godot* when Vladimir seems to experience his own cognitive exhaustion. Consider the lines he utters when he ponders the likelihood that his experiences are bound to repeat themselves indefinitely:

VLADIMIR: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? [...] We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. [*He listens.*] (*CDW*, 84)

Here Vladimir certainly experiences something similar to what Connor calls “self-doubling”: “the insistence of series [...] deprived of the sense of priority or finality” leads Vladimir to feel that he is “doubled on the inside [...] by what [he] repeats” and by what he knows he will continue to repeat (Connor, 121). Vladimir’s suspicion that he may be dreaming indicates that uncanny sense of self-doubling, of being simultaneously in two places at once, and it leads to his apparent abandonment of the search for an intellectual value, a truth, in his experience.

While Vladimir might seem to approach an encounter with absolute silence here, it is likely that he is remembering or imagining the sound of cries, and he invites his audience to do

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<sup>154</sup> Sara Crangle, *Prosaic Desires: Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter, and Anticipation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 75; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>155</sup> Adam Phillips, “On Being Bored,” in *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 71.

the same. He is unable to experience total silence because he is unable to go silent: his questioning of truth does not quite amount to a direct encounter with an empty experience, figured here as the air, but rather with the sound of his own listening, of his own expectations. In the terms of Beckett's letter to Naumann, Vladimir is already on the lookout for his own elsewhere. The impossibility of true silence is highlighted throughout Beckett's postwar work. It is perhaps most explicitly demonstrated by the narrator of *The Unnamable*, whose own decision to "seek air" leads to the following conclusion: "Hearing this voice no more, that's what I call going silent. That is to say I'll hear it still, if I listen hard. [...] Listening hard, that's what I call going silent" (*T*, 393). Even "silent listening" or "listening hard" constitutes a means of "hearing the voice" that assigns value to "silence," a turning away from a direct, non-goal-oriented experience that remains always out of reach. In this light, Moran's boast that he can experience total silence—"Not one person in a hundred knows how to be silent and listen, no, nor even to conceive what such a thing means. Yet only then can you detect, beyond the fatuous clamour, the silence of which the universe is made" (*T*, 121)—seems inflated by arrogance or wishful thinking. What he does not realize, or does not want to admit, is that what he hears is his own straining for silence.

Seeking to give in to silence also raises the possibility of giving in to the external gaze of the audience, always encoded into the text. Vladimir indicates this connection at the end of his soliloquy: "At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on" (*CDW*, 84–85). This line evokes a *mise-en-abyme* structure that encourages the audience member to form similar conclusions: "Of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on." It might be assumed that this conclusion would lead the audience member to yield to the sheer sensations aroused by the play's repetitions and abandon the search for value or truth in the work. Yet even that submission to pure rhythms, to an experience of the passing of time akin to the strange pace that time takes on in dreams, would

be predicated upon a preconceived posture designed to yield a certain benefit. Even giving in to the conclusion “I am dreaming” rests on a paradoxical knowledge of being deluded, and it posits a certain value in sleeping on.

*Godot* repeatedly highlights the fact that even the sensations aroused by boredom are inextricable from the logic of profit and loss, but the clearest example occurs when Vladimir is debating whether he and Estragon should help Pozzo, who along with Lucky is in a heap on the ground:

VLADIMIR: We wait. We are bored. [*He throws up his hand.*] No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work. [*He advances towards the heap, stops in his stride.*] In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness! [*He broods.*]

POZZO: Two hundred [francs]!

VLADIMIR: We're coming! (*CDW*, 75)

Vladimir's recognition of his own boredom is already a rationalization of experience, and it leads him to articulate his embrace of diversion in plainly economic terms—it must not “go to waste” and demands a certain amount of work. He quickly realizes that the value he attaches to diversion is suspect, which leads him to abandon the logic that posited value in that diversion and to succumb to silent brooding. That silent brooding, however, suggests that Vladimir continues to search for a solution to the conundrum, and the fact that diversion is immediately embraced when it is equated with the promise of material gain—Pozzo's offer of two hundred francs—suggests that this embrace represents not an abandonment of the concept of value but rather an unreflective concession to it.



Similar patterns arise throughout *Molloy*, with repetitions leading to an experience of boredom that leads Molloy to seek his own elsewhere. A clear example occurs as Molloy is being pushed towards the police station. This scene seems to anticipate, albeit with a more sympathetic spirit of pathos, Moran's ambition to detect "the silence of which the universe is made":

While still putting my best foot foremost I gave myself up to that golden moment, as if I had been someone else. It was the hour of rest, the forenoon's toil ended, the afternoon's to come. The wisest [...] were savouring its languid ending, forgetful of recent cares, indifferent to those at hand. Others on the contrary were using it to hatch their plans, their heads in their hands. [...] I was straining towards those spurious deeps, their lying promise of gravity and peace. [...] Forgetful of my mother, set free from the act, merged in this alien hour, saying, Respite, respite. (*T*, 21)

Rabaté describes this "golden moment" as "a moment of pure poetry" (60). It seems appropriate that this poetic moment is articulated in terms that resonate with what is elsewhere known as the "demon of noontide," a figure for a specific understanding of boredom or ennui. Crangle defines this figure as "a time spirit [that] binds discussions of melancholia and boredom from the fourth to the twentieth centuries," a spirit that "directs the bored subject's interest away from him- or herself, [...] [leading to a] more immediate response to one's surroundings" (75–76).<sup>156</sup> On the surface, Crangle's description of this "demon" seems to describe Molloy's experience, which is linked to the doubled structure of an ordinary daily routine, where the "toil" of the "afternoon" mirrors that of the "forenoon." The "wisest" do not use this brief pause between these two repetitions for any rational purpose—hence the implied slight to those who use this moment "to hatch their plans"—rather, they adopt an attitude of indifference and forgetfulness that leads

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<sup>156</sup> When Crangle writes of a "more immediate response to one's surroundings," she summarizes Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

towards “deeps” promising “gravity and peace.” That “promise,” as Rabaté’s comment implies, is associated with the poetic promise of a literary work.

If Molloy’s sense of rapture seems to contradict the hellish implications of the figure of the demon of noontide, consider Bataille’s final comment on Molloy’s golden moment:

These two realms—horror and rapture—are closer to one another than we have supposed. [...] Would the joys of poetry be accessible to someone who turns away from horror, and would authentic despair be any different from the “golden moment” Molloy experiences at the hands of the police? (63)

Connor describes the “desperation” of a hypothetical reader of Beckett who “as she struggles down the page, [...] lose[s] her place, lose[s] the sense,” and becomes “adrift in the words” (32). Bataille’s logic could be applied to her experience, as well, which could be conceived as little different from Molloy’s golden moment. Yet as Molloy notes, the promise of respite is a lie, and indeed, even in his golden moment, Molloy displays no immediate or intuitive response to his surroundings. He engages in analysis of the others he mentions—those “savouring [the noontide’s] languid ending” and those “hatch[ing] their plans”—and his straining towards “spurious deeps” reveals that he seeks to extract a preconceived value from his inner experience, which he pre-emptively names “respite.”

The impossibility of a total retreat from the world of profit and loss is also made evident at the end of Moran’s narrative. After selling his furniture to pay his “heavy debts,” Moran decides, “I have been a man long enough, I shall not put up with it any more, I shall not try any more” (*T*, 175). Yet this plan lasts no longer than Moran’s retreat from the world of “people and talk”: his resolution to “live in the garden” falters, and he goes “back into the house” to begin his narrative, which he now admits opens with a lie (*T*, 176). The circular structure of Moran’s story implies that he will go on writing indefinitely, urged on in his “report” by a “voice” that he

attempts to translate onto the page, even while admitting that his understanding of it is “all wrong perhaps” (*T*, 176). Despite recognizing his own ignorance, he proves incapable of giving up on the search for an abstract value in this inner voice, and his desire to translate its strange language into a linear narrative is incessant and insatiable.

Scholars have demonstrated the near impossibility of giving up on the search for intellectual certainties in the sensations ignited by an encounter with Beckett’s work. To be sure, Gendron’s tone is ironic when she writes that Beckett’s work “simply begs for enlightenment [...] to those readers who believe that when one reads one will come away from a text with a ‘message’” (60). Yet that perceived “begging for enlightenment” does not disappear once the search for a coherent message is given up, as demonstrated by Gendron’s and Connor’s attempts to find value in the confusion arising from Beckett’s repetitions. Writing of critics who pursue what he terms philosophical “red herrings” in Beckett’s trilogy, Critchley quotes *The Unnamable*: “So they build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another, it’s human, a lobster couldn’t do it” (Critchley, 143–44; *T*, 342). Humans are incapable of the imagined pure ignorance of a lobster, incidentally the same animal that in Beckett’s 1934 story “Dante and the Lobster” experiences extreme suffering when it is plunged alive into boiling water. This is a bare fact that Belacqua is unable to confront directly, instead rationalizing it away with the line, “It’s a quick death, God help us all” (“It is not,” the narrator assures us).<sup>157</sup>

### **Conclusion: Beckett’s Failure to Fail**

Much of Beckett’s writing, then, strives to conceive of works of art, literature, or drama as abstract entities or forces inaccessible to reason, entities that drift away even as they are encountered. Yet as this chapter has shown, works such as the “Three Dialogues,” “La peinture

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<sup>157</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Dante and the Lobster,” in *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934; London: Calder and Boyars, 1970), 21.

des van Velde,” *Molloy*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *The Unnamable* ultimately demonstrate the impossibility of separating “the world that opens under the page” from the world above the page. Even the most sophisticated and sympathetic analyses of Beckett’s work continue to identify residues of realism in the work and thus to conform (if only at a far remove) to the type of value-oriented logic Beckett resists in his postwar writing. From the first, reviewers have seen positivity in Beckett’s negativity, as when Vivian Mercier wrote that *Godot* achieves “a theoretical impossibility”: namely, “a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats[,] [...] a play in which nothing happens, *twice*.”<sup>158</sup> The fact that Mercier’s comment has itself become a (widely accepted) cliché in Beckett criticism demonstrates just how central and productive issues of impossibility, boredom, and repetition have been to the reception of Beckett’s works.

A 1956 letter from Beckett to Alan Schneider puts the matter into more concrete terms. Schneider had recently directed the Miami premiere of *Waiting for Godot*, during which much of the audience walked out of the theater. Beckett comments on his negative reviewers in Miami, who described the play as a “great bore,” as “wearisome, [...] devoid of excitement, [...] containing little to keep the theatre-goer interested.”<sup>159</sup> He deprecates these reviews despite the fact that within this very letter, he admits that his play is likely and even designed to bore “theatre-goers” (*LII*, 594). The sheer sensation of being bored by *Waiting for Godot* is alternately conceived as an appropriate and even unavoidable response to the work and as a symptom of bourgeois hedonism. What Beckett hopes for are audiences whose interpretative faculties will indeed be deflected by the play, who will allow their attention to drift elsewhere, but who will nevertheless detect the value in their failure to make any sense of the events onstage.

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<sup>158</sup> Mercier, “The Uneventful Event,” review of *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Critical Response to Samuel Beckett*, ed. Cathleen Culotta Andonian (London: Greenwood Press, 1998), 95. Originally published in *Irish Times*, 18 February 1956, 6.

<sup>159</sup> Quotations from reviews are included by the editors of the *Letters* (*LII*, 595–96, n. 2). They cite Walter Winchell, “Walter Winchell of New York,” *Daily Mirror*, 6 January 1956, 10; and Lary, “Waiting for Godot,” *Variety*, 11 January 1956, 75.

The end result is a contradiction, for to find value in an experience, even if that value is conceived as sheer sensation, is to make sense of an experience. There is at least one instance in which Beckett almost directly states a conception of work-as-interpreted-experience, and it appears in the following passage from the same letter:

I cannot help but feeling that the success of *Godot* has been very largely the result of a misunderstanding, or of various misunderstandings, and that perhaps you have succeeded better than any one [*sic*] else in stating its true nature. [...] I am not suggesting that you were unduly influenced by all I said or that your production was not primarily your own and nobody else's, but it is probable that our conversations confirmed you in your aversion to half-measures and frills, i.e. to precisely those things that 90% of theatre-goes want. (*LII*, 594; also in *D*, 106)

In this letter, Beckett develops the same principles of interpretation he develops elsewhere, including in his critical work. *Waiting for Godot* is conceived as an abstract entity that is distorted by misinterpretations based on an unreflective conformity with conventional expectations. However, in this letter—as in other instances—Beckett's inherent kindness and tact prevent him from going too far, and he very quickly makes concessions. He even shows some openness to novelty and creative adaptation, provided that the original vision of the author continues to function as a guarantor of the work's unity and integrity. This is an issue that expressed itself acutely in adaptations of Beckett's work for the stage, and it is one that Beckett struggled with throughout his life as a playwright. The next chapter examines how Beckett embraces a new rhetoric of interpretation for performance.

## CHAPTER 4

### Visions in Context: Imagining Performance from *Eleutheria* to *Catastrophe*

What Beckett commends in his correspondence with Schneider—and what he often encourages in other contexts, too—seems to be a reluctance to add to the published text, regardless of the imagined expectations of the audience. Yet Beckett would also admit that it was “hard to explain” his theatrical ideas “in writing,” especially when he could not be sure where they would be staged or who would be staging them.<sup>160</sup> Sometimes he would even approve of a director’s awareness of issues that might well be on the minds of the audiences before which his plays were being performed: in 1981, he would express admiration for a mixed-race production at the Baxter Theatre in the University of Cape Town that although it did not add anything to the script clearly highlighted racial hierarchies within Apartheid-era South Africa (Knowlson, 638–39). Beckett’s shifting attitudes towards context-specific adaptations of his plays seem to arise from an uncertainty regarding how best to approach the theater as a medium for artistic expression. Performance is traditionally constrained by the dictates of the written text, but as a physical medium, it highlights acutely how a work can be conceived as a loosely related set of

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<sup>160</sup> Beckett to Schneider, 4 January 1960, in Harmon, ed., *No Author Better Served*, 59.

experiences, with all the immediacy, contingency, and variability that such a concept implies. In this chapter, I address a related ambivalence in Beckett's scripts, which often present themselves both as finished, quasi-literary texts and as notes toward performance. I argue that they anticipate, albeit not always with glee, their own propensity to lead to productions that could vary according to different audiences and directors. Such considerations are found to be made especially explicit in *Eleutheria* and *Catastrophe*, two plays that seem worth exploring in tandem given their own fraught production histories and given that, as the first and nearly last plays that Beckett wrote, they provide interesting bookends to his dramatic career. (His very last play, *What Where*, might invite a similar line of investigation, but it was quickly re-conceived as a piece for television over which he had a great degree of control.)

Germane to this discussion are received distinctions between faithful interpretation, loosely conceived as regrettable but minimal deviance from an authorized script, versus creative adaptation, often described by critics in terms of willful "distortion" and "travesty" of Beckett's theatrical imagination.<sup>161</sup> Such distinctions are especially vexed given the legal wrangling that has surrounded some of the performances of Beckett's plays. One of the most famous examples concerns JoAnne Akalaitis's production of *Endgame* in a subway tunnel, which was only allowed to go on after a settlement was reached that included an insert in the production program expressing Beckett's total disapproval.<sup>162</sup> More problematic than that, however, is the controversy surrounding the 1990 production of *Catastrophe* at the John Houseman Studio Theater in New York, a controversy that arose shortly after Beckett's death. Beckett wrote the play in 1982 for the "Night for Václav Havel" organized by the *Association Internationale de Défense*

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<sup>161</sup> These terms are drawn from James Knowlson, *Images of Beckett*, photographs by John Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 99.

<sup>162</sup> For a thorough account of this confrontation and the circumstances leading up to it, and for an intriguing argument that Beckett's resistance to Akalaitis's production had as much to do with those circumstances as with the production itself, see Natka Bianchini, "Bare Interiors, Chicken Wire Cages and Subway Stations—Re-thinking Beckett's Response to the ART *Endgame* in Light of Earlier Productions," in *Samuel Beckett's Endgame*, ed. Mark S. Byron (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 121–43.

*des Artistes* (AIDA), a night held at that year's Avignon Theatre Festival in protest of Havel's imprisonment in Czechoslovakia.<sup>163</sup> Vasek Simek, the Czech expatriate director of the 1990 New York Production, added a moment to the end of the play in which the protagonist smiled as the Czechoslovak national anthem was played, an apparent nod to the recent success of the Velvet Revolution, in which Havel had played a crucial role.<sup>164</sup> Simek's alteration to Beckett's script might not have seemed too outrageous or provocative to regulars of the John Houseman Studio Theater, which at the time was staging an eclectic variety of productions that were sometimes experimental and sometimes explicitly political but often involved unexpected uses of music.<sup>165</sup> To some with personal and professional ties to the recently deceased Beckett, however, the changes seemed deliberately provocative.

Beckett's American publisher Barney Rosset, formerly of Grove Press, along with his lawyer Martin Garbus, would publicly denounce that production of *Catastrophe* with reference to Beckett's reaction to Akalaitis's *Endgame*:

Instead of the play's ending with the defeated protagonist being shown to the crowd, it now ends with the playing of the Czechoslovak national anthem as the catalyst for the protagonist unfurling himself to his full height, now victorious. [...] Not so long ago,

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<sup>163</sup> Havel was imprisoned for his involvement with Charter 77, which called for an improvement in human and civil rights conditions in Czechoslovakia, his involvement with the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS), and his self-publication of plays and essays that were considered "subversive." See introduction to Havel, *Mistake*, in *Index on Censorship* 13, no. 1 (February 1984): 13.

<sup>164</sup> For summaries of and reactions to Simek's production of *Catastrophe*, see Martin Garbus and Barney Rosset, "New Finale Would Appall Beckett," letter to the editor, *New York Times*, 23 March 1990, <[nytimes.com/1990/03/23/opinion/1-new-finale-would-appall-beckett-726190.html](http://nytimes.com/1990/03/23/opinion/1-new-finale-would-appall-beckett-726190.html)>; Sally Moffet, "Ending of Beckett Play Preserves the Meaning," *New York Times*, 24 March 1990, A34; Mel Gussow, "Homages to Martyrdom, by Havel and for Him," *New York Times*, 9 March 1990, C3.

<sup>165</sup> For an idea of the kinds of work that the theater was staging around that time, see Jack Anderson, "What to Do (And Not) while Waiting," review of "Something between Them" by Grupo Danza Teatro de U. B. A., *New York Times*, 31 May 1991, C3; Jennifer Dunning, "Mixed Media from France," review of *Bare Barre* by the Transe Express Circus, *New York Times*, 30 April 1989, <[nytimes.com/1989/04/30/theater/reviews-dance-bar-barre-mixed-media-from-france.html](http://nytimes.com/1989/04/30/theater/reviews-dance-bar-barre-mixed-media-from-france.html)>; Stephen Holden, "A Long Conversation with a Captive Audience," review of *A Rendezvous with God* by Miriam Hoffman, trans. Hoffman and Berkowicz, *New York Times*, 25 July 1991, C14.



[Beckett] asked to have his name removed from a production of his play “Endgame” by JoAnne Alkalitis [*sic*] in Boston, even though she tampered with his play far less.<sup>166</sup>

Not everyone would agree with this assessment. The stage and screen actor Sally Moffet wrote a letter in response to claim, “The dehumanized object at the center of the play never seemed ‘victorious’ to me”; “[The protagonist’s] ‘unfurling’ and smiling appear only two more reflexes manipulated by the director”; and, “The playwright’s genius is well served, I think.”<sup>167</sup> Such objections have generally had little impact on received accounts of this production, however. Rosset and Garbus’s appeal to their involvement in the controversy over Alkalitis’s production seems to have lent weight to the idea that they are uniquely qualified to safeguard what Mel Gussow, in his review of Simek’s production, calls “the starkness and the specificity of [Beckett’s] vision.”<sup>168</sup>

These debates call to mind confrontations over *Eleutheria*, confrontations that would arise fewer than five years after Simek’s production of *Catastrophe*.<sup>169</sup> Since Beckett reportedly “considered *Eleutheria* a failed work,” his long-time French publisher and literary executor Jérôme Lindon (of Minuit) did not want it published and never allowed it to be performed, a stance that led to confrontation with Rosset.<sup>170</sup> Rosset pushed to publish the play in the early

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<sup>166</sup> Garbus and Rosset, “New Finale Would Appall Beckett.”

<sup>167</sup> Moffet, “Ending of Beckett Play Preserves the Meaning,” A34.

<sup>168</sup> Gussow, “Homages to Martyrdom,” C3. Gussow’s is a negative review, but it does not even mention the use of music at the end of the play, arguing instead that poor acting and stage design are what cause the performance to fail.

<sup>169</sup> The Faber and Faber edition of *Eleutheria*, following Beckett’s typescript, spells the title without the acute on the third *e*, while the Foxrock edition includes the acute: i.e., *Eleuthéria*. Since I rely primarily on the Faber and Faber edition, I spell the play’s title without the acute.

<sup>170</sup> Lindon, “Avertissement,” preface to *Eleutheria* by Samuel Beckett (Paris: Minuit, 1995), 7; hereafter cited parenthetically. All translations from Lindon’s preface are my own. Rosset offers his own version of events—which does not differ substantially from Lindon’s in matters of fact—in his introduction to Beckett, *Eleuthéria*, trans. Michael Brodsky (New York: Foxrock, 1995). See also Tucker for a general overview. For a contemporaneous take on how and why Beckett’s estate objected to the “unauthorized, staged reading” of the play organized by Rosset, see also Mel Gussow, “A Reading Upsets Beckett’s Estate,” *New York Times*, 24 September 1994, <[nytimes.com/1994/09/24/theater/a-reading-upsets-beckett-s-estate.html](http://nytimes.com/1994/09/24/theater/a-reading-upsets-beckett-s-estate.html)>.

1990s, and he tried to organize a public performance of it against Lindon's wishes. When the New York Theatre Workshop backed out for fear of legal action, Rosset quickly arranged to have a "private reading" of the play in the American Mime Theater, which was housed in his own apartment building, a reading that led the estate to "[discharge] Rosset as Beckett's North-American theatrical agent" (Tucker, 239). A number of such "private readings" have taken place since then, some of which offer free admission with the donation of a non-perishable food item, and the play has been publicly staged once in Iran (241). None of these has been approved by the estate. Lindon raised Beckett's apparent reiteration in later life that he did not want the play published or performed, and he cited the "pact of friendship" between him and Beckett as justification for his opposition to its widespread dissemination. If newcomers had their first encounter with Beckett's work through *Eleutheria*, he implied, they might be put off from exploring the rest of his oeuvre (Lindon, 11).

The debates over *Eleutheria* and *Catastrophe* seem to arise at least in part because both complicate received ideas about Beckett's dramatic vision. Such ideas tend to call to mind the simplicity and economy of gesture employed in a piece such as *Not I*, with its extremely austere set and its extremely precise instructions to the actor, or *Rough for Theatre II*, a tableau from which was considered representative enough of Beckett's vision to qualify for the cover for the 2006 edition of Beckett's *Complete Dramatic Works*. By contrast, the script of *Eleutheria* calls for a large, revolving, relatively realistic set, contains (relatively) realistic dialogue, and includes vague stage directions that leave the "marginal action" of each act "for the actor to determine" (*El*, 5). The play also seems uncharacteristically indexed to a particular historical moment. It makes repeated, unusually direct references to the French postwar context in which it was written, and with its intrusive spectator characters, its onstage characters' propensity to flag up their status as characters in a play, and its explicit references to its own script, it engages with the legacy of experimental theatrical works of the interwar period such as Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in*

*Search of an Author* and Guillaume Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias* (both adduced below)—an engagement to which Beckett would allude when in 1986 he cited, as a reason for not wanting the play to be performed, the fact that “since he had written [*Eleutheria*], the theatre itself had moved on with the plays of Ionesco, Genet, and Adamov” (Knowlson, 363). *Catastrophe*, like *Eleutheria*, stages relatively realistic dialogue and a relatively realistic situation, which might seem out of place alongside more enigmatic or introspective dramatic works of the late 1970s and early 1980s such as *A Piece of Monologue*, *Rockaby*, or *Ohio Impromptu*. With its central, decrepit figure subject to the whims of an officious authority figure, it too seems unusually context-specific: it seems to reflect, and even offer commentary on, Havel's imprisonment.<sup>171</sup>

In the case of *Catastrophe*, debates seem to arise from a critical wish to reconcile the play's particular, historically rooted themes with the more recognizably Beckettian sense of uprootedness, a wish that any added reference to contemporary events would seem to work against. In the case of *Eleutheria*, a suspicion of total irreconcilability seems to be at least partially responsible for the ban on performance. Yet Beckett himself rarely, if ever, describes his dramatic vision as perfectly clear, specific, or unrelated to external circumstance. When he recalls composing *Waiting for Godot*, for example, he writes, “I must have indicated the little I have been able to make out. The bowler hats for example” (*LII*, 316). Here the notion of vision seems not a synonym for a totalizing idea for a work but rather a metaphor for a compositional practice that consists merely of registering those ideas that make themselves apparent. With this idea in mind, it might not be so surprising that the stage directions of *Eleutheria* at times seem only partially worked out or that the events of *Catastrophe* might resonate with events at the forefront

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<sup>171</sup> This is not to say that Havel was ever reduced to so abject a physical or mental state as is the protagonist of *Catastrophe*. He was forced to do hard labor during his time in prison, he was sometimes denied food, and he was bullied by prison guards, but the pressure on him was eased when his health began to suffer noticeably, and throughout his imprisonment he was allowed to write one four-page letter home per week. See Paul Wilson, introduction to Havel, *Letters to Olga, June 1979–September 1982*, trans. Wilson (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 6–9. Originally published as *Dpisy Olze* in 1983.

of the Beckett's mind, and it might seem even less surprising that as a director Beckett would continue to tweak and adapt his scripts.

Debates over performances of Beckett's work, then, can be conceived in terms of these two conflicting understandings of Beckett's vision. Rosset and Lindon, despite their own squabbles, seem to be in agreement that productions ought to remain as faithful as possible to a published master-text, conceived as a repository for a finished work of art. Others view his works as fluid and contingent entities, as did Lee Breuer in his stage adaptation of Beckett's prose work *The Lost Ones*, which both made cuts to the text and featured unauthorized uses of music composed by Philip Glass. (According to Beckett, this production "worked outstandingly well in its own terms.")<sup>172</sup> The Breuer production resonates with the views of theater practitioners such as Akalaitis, who tend to approach Beckett as an innovative dramaturge whose pieces necessarily call for constant revision as they are adapted to changing times and places. After studying under the experimental theater director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski, Akalaitis learned to emphasize "working with [...] an image to the text" over strict "interpretation of the text," which she links with the views of Stella Adler.<sup>173</sup> It is interesting to note that Adler's naturalistic techniques, derived largely from methods first developed by Constantin Stanislavsky, are concerned with motivation and character development in ways that resonate with the literary aesthetic of the "naturalists" whom Beckett disparaged in his lectures at Trinity College Dublin and in his "Three Dialogues" (*PTD*, 103).<sup>174</sup>

The conflict in approaches to Beckett's scripts highlights the tension between a conception of a work as, on the one hand, something fully formed in the text and merely

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<sup>172</sup> Beckett, letter to Barney Rosset, 1 April 1958, quoted in Gontarski, "Revising Himself," 131.

<sup>173</sup> See Craig Gholson, interview with JoAnne Akalaitis, *BOMB Magazine*, Spring 1983, <[bombmagazine.org/article/237](http://bombmagazine.org/article/237)>.

<sup>174</sup> On the Trinity lectures and Beckett's somewhat idiosyncratic conception of naturalism, see Bolin, *Beckett and the Modern Novel*, 20.

awaiting embodiment, and on the other, as something half-formed, only hinted at in the text, something that comes into being as it is worked out by specific interpreters. These issues can be thought of within another, perhaps more familiar framework, in terms of the now decades-old response that Lionel Abel made to Martin Esslin's concept of the theater of the absurd. Esslin had described how many twentieth-century plays—among which Beckett's were given a prominent role—resist being “well-made” in their rejection of “traditional plot devices and of the ding-dong of witty and logically built-up dialogue.”<sup>175</sup> As Martin Puchner emphasizes, Abel thought Esslin's idea “only named the apparent confusion caused by modernist theatre, but did little to solve it.”<sup>176</sup> Abandoning fidelity to that spirit of confusion, Abel coined the concept of metatheater in his claim that such plays update Aristotle's understanding of classical tragedy, which Abel (following Aristotle) defined as a dramatic work that moves its audience to fear and pity. For Abel, works of metatheater move the audience to consider the conventions and limits of theater itself (see Abel, especially 133–35). According to Esslin's concept of absurd theater, to adapt Beckett's plays to particular audiences might be to try to reinstate the idea of the “well-made” that the script itself rejects. According to Abel's concept of metatheater, such adaptation might be necessary in order to ensure that a particular production has the proper effect on its audience. In Abel's formulation, the conflict between an un-dramatic plot and the imagined expectations of a particular audience can be exactly what renders a play dramatic.

*Eleutheria* and *Catastrophe* explore such conflicting paradigms in particularly explicit ways: a spectator character invades the stage during *Eleutheria* and forces the protagonist to deliver a monologue conforming to the spectator's demand for interpretative resolution, and a director character in *Catastrophe* molds the scene before him according to his own ideas about what his

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<sup>175</sup> Martin Esslin, introduction to *Absurd Drama*, ed. Esslin (New York: Penguin, 1965), 1. Esslin had developed this argument in his influential book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961). For examples of more recent critical invocations of this term, see Andrea Oppo, *Philosophical Aesthetics and Samuel Beckett* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 204; Kate Dorney, “Hamming It Up in *Endgame*,” in *Samuel Beckett's Endgame*, ed. Mark S. Byron (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 232; Daniel Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69.

<sup>176</sup> See Martin Puchner, introduction to Abel, *Tragedy and Metatheatre*, 3.

audience will want, with the script nowhere in sight. As I show, the expectations of these figures resonate with what the plays suggest are the expectations of the audiences before which they will be performed, and as such, both works offer critiques of the function of theater within its own particular cultural and historical contexts. At the same time, however, both plays dramatize a fundamental, often comic confusion about how to launch any critique given the recognized ease with which a slight change of interpretative context can transform subversion into conformity. This is a problem addressed in Havel's work, as well, and an initial examination of his plays and essays suggests concrete, context-appropriate terms for understanding how *Catastrophe* acknowledges its own comic inability to articulate anything that could withstand the vicissitudes of changing times and cultures. This comparison suggests how other Beckett plays might articulate that conundrum in changing terms indexed to particular contexts, a tendency that indeed seems to have begun with his very first play. The complexity and fragility of the critiques offered in Beckett's drama suggest that a certain degree of directorial ingenuity might indeed be necessary to ensure that it continues to challenge, rather than edify, audiences eager to recognize themselves in the work.

### **The Difficulties of Being Direct**

Havel, too, consistently aimed to challenge his audiences, and a comparison with his work opens up an unfamiliar perspective on Beckett's *Catastrophe*. Curiously, few detailed comparisons between the two playwrights have been made. This is perhaps partially because Havel's avowed political humanism, which I adduce below, could seem at odds with what is increasingly viewed as Beckett's anti-humanist aesthetics. Despite this incongruity, it seems appropriate to investigate how *Catastrophe* resonates with Havel's plays and the principles he espoused.<sup>177</sup> In a 1983 letter to

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<sup>177</sup> Keir Elam offers a rare investigation of these resonances, arguing that Havel's plays, like *Catastrophe*, have the capacity to implicate their audiences in moral and ethical double-binds that offer no chance for resolution. I am

Havel, Beckett claimed to have “read and admired [Havel’s] plays in French translation,” and wrote of *Catastrophe*, “To have helped you, however little, and saluted you and all you stand for, was a moment in my writing life that I cherish.”<sup>178</sup> *Catastrophe*’s dedication to Havel might signal more than mere moral support. At the time of his death, Beckett owned a copy of Havel’s play *The Memorandum* (1965), and of his three one-act plays, *Audience* (1975), *Unveiling* (1975), and *Protest* (1978), the latter three nicknamed the “Vanek plays” because they all center on the mostly silent, withdrawn protagonist Ferdinand Vanek.<sup>179</sup> The resonances between these plays and Beckett’s plays are striking. Like Beckett, Havel gestures towards his own dream of a form of unequivocal utterance totally resistant to mis- or re-interpretation, a dream that, like Beckett, he seems to recognize as an impossible one.

In his major political essay “The Power of the Powerless” (1978), Havel would include this type of utterance within his rubric for “living in the truth.” It amounts to a commitment to a “free expression of life” by which individuals refuse to “live within a lie,” which would require that they be “alienated” from “the terrain of their authentic existence.”<sup>180</sup> Such expressions,

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sympathetic to Elam’s approach, but whereas he speaks only of audiences in a general sense, I ultimately highlight the tendency for Havel’s and Beckett’s plays to imagine and address particular demographics. See Elam, “Catastrophic Mistakes: Beckett, Havel, The End,” *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 3 (1994): 1–28.

<sup>178</sup> Beckett to Havel, 17 September 1983, BC MS JEK A/2/146, Samuel Beckett Collection, Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading. Beckett wrote this in response to a letter Havel wrote to him to thank him for contributing *Catastrophe* to the Avignon event. In that letter, Havel expresses his great admiration for Beckett: “From the first you have been for me a deity in the heavens of spirit. I have been immensely influenced by you as a human being, and in a way as a writer, too.” Havel to Beckett, 29 May 1983, BC MS JEK A/2/146, Samuel Beckett Collection, Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.

<sup>179</sup> See Van Hulle and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s Library*, 272. On the importance of these four plays within Havel’s canon, see Carol Rocamora, *Acts of Courage: Václav Havel’s Life in the Theater* (Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus, 2004), 66–67, 184–94; hereafter cited parenthetically. I rely on *The Memorandum*, trans. Vera Blackwell (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981); hereafter cited parenthetically as *M*. For the Vanek plays, I rely on the versions of *Audience*, *Unveiling*, and *Protest* contained in Václav Havel, *Selected Plays, 1963–83*, trans. George Theiner, Jan Novak, and Vera Blackwell, respectively (London: Faber and Faber, 1992); hereafter cited parenthetically as *SP*. “Vanek” is hereafter spelled without diacritical marks in accordance with this translation, except when quoting from sources in which “Vaněk” is used. The original Czech versions of these plays are titled *Audience*, *Vernisáž*, and *Protest*, and the English versions of the former two have also appeared under the titles *Conversation* and *Private View*, respectively.

<sup>180</sup> Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” translated by Paul Wilson, in Havel, *Living in Truth: Twenty-Two Essays Published on the Occasion of the Award of the Erasmus Prize to Václav Havel*, ed. Jan Vladislav (1978; London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 55, 57, 77; hereafter cited parenthetically.

Havel explains, tend to take the form of straightforward statements of obvious truths, statements that refuse to participate in the “world of appearances,” as demonstrated, for instance, when a citizen “stops putting up [...] slogans merely to ingratiate himself,” when “he stops voting in elections he knows are a farce,” or when “he begins to say what he really thinks at political meetings” (55–56). This conception of the power of unequivocal utterance proves more tenable in his political writing than in his playwriting. Thirteen years previously, *The Memorandum* had already demonstrated, in comic fashion, the naïveté of attempts to expose the hollowness of bureaucratic language games by speaking clearly and plainly. The play even equates the desire for straightforward, unequivocal utterance with a willing participation in shambolic doublespeak. It satirizes excessive governmental bureaucracy primarily through its representation of the government-invented language Ptydepe, which is purportedly a “thoroughly exact language,” but which in fact only introduces extreme confusion conducive to a power grab by the play’s chief villain (and chief Ptydepe proponent) Jan Ballas.

The comical edge of Ptydepe is revealed in the opening monologue of Josef Gross, who reads aloud to himself a memorandum that he finds utterly incomprehensible: “Ra ko hutu d dekotu ely trebomu emusohe, vdegar yd, stro reny er gryk kendy, [...]” (*M*, 3). The ridiculousness of this artificial language is only reinforced after Gross finally, near the end of the play, has the contents of the mysterious memorandum translated. He finds that it expresses a glowing commendation of his leadership from his superiors, one ironically expressing support for his resistance to the introduction of Ptydepe, which they, like Gross, have found to be “a profoundly harmful attempt to place office communications on a confused, unrealistic, anti-human basis” (*M*, 70). The term “human” is key, for it echoes Gross’s earliest condemnation of the language, in which he states, “I’m a humanist and [...] every single member of this staff is human and must become more and more human. If we take from him his human language, [...] we shall have prevented him from becoming fully human” (*M*, 12). The terms of Gross’s



rejection of Ptydepe seem to anticipate what Havel would later define as an anti-ideological desire to “live within the truth” and to remain grounded in “the terrain of [his] authentic existence.” Yet the comically confused and circular nature of Gross’s logic, combined with his inability to translate his desire into actual change, only underscores the naïve ineptitude of his attempts to abstain from Ballas’s power games. The goal of “becoming fully human” ultimately seems comparable to the goal of Ptydepe. Just as Ptydepe aims but fails to cut through the inefficiency of natural language, Gross’s “human language” aims but fails to cut through the generally accepted rules of the bureaucratic game and to expose their bankrupt foundations.

If Gross’s confused declarations seem to hint at what Havel would later call living within the truth, Vanek’s apparent steadfast silence has seemed to many critics to anticipate that concept more directly and explicitly. “The all-but-silent Vaněk,” Carol Rocamora argues, “in the whirl of paradoxes, ironies, and absurdities around him,” is “fixed at the center, [...] clear in his steadfastness to [...] ‘living in truth’” (184). Yet Vanek, like Gross, is comically inept as an agent for social change, and his embarrassed, confused taciturnity is similarly made to serve dubious frameworks. In *Audience*, for example, his reserve seems at first to win the day, yet throughout the play his silence is repeatedly misinterpreted as haughtiness, and he finds himself forced to offer platitudes such as “Thank you, fine,” and “It’s all a bloody mess,” which despite their opposite valences can both be (mis)interpreted as mere familiar refrains masking the systemic problems that free expressions of truth are meant to expose. Similar bumbblings occur in *Unveiling* and *Protest*. Vanek’s reserve in *Unveiling* at first promises to reveal the hollowness of the consumerist exhibitionism of his aesthete friends, Michael and Vera, who all but suffer nervous breakdowns when Vanek fails to appreciate their collection of expensive curios as effusively as they would like. Yet in the end Vanek’s own politeness leads him to pretend to share their consumerist values. In *Protest*, Vanek’s fellow playwright and friend Stanek shies away—evidently out of cowardice and self-interest—from signing a petition to have a young man released from

prison, but his excuse that his signature would only make things worse seems to be justified when the young man is released before the petition can be filed. No clear alternatives to posturing and deception are evident at the end of this series. This may partially account for why Havel later titled a collection of his political speeches, which attempt to describe how politics can be combined with a straightforward adherence to common sense and a consistent moral code, *The Art of the Impossible*.<sup>181</sup>

The attempted withdrawal of characters such as Gross and Vanek from the ideologically motivated demands of their interlocutors resonates strongly with concerns running throughout *The Unnamable*. In an attempt to see through all the confusion, the narrator can only recognize, “I shall never be silent” (*T*, 291). This line could be interpreted as a statement of commitment, as the narrator’s refusal to relinquish a particular mode of utterance even when it seems all but impossible to do otherwise, and of course that same interpretation could be applied to the famous final line of the work, “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (*T*, 414). Yet such lines can, of course, be interpreted in another way: the narrator doggedly pursues a desire to withdraw from the confusion while bemoaning the impossibility of doing so. The longing to be silent, that is, might be conceivable in terms that resonate with Havel’s depictions of his characters’ futile attempts to find the “terrain of [their] authentic existence.”

The same conception seems appropriate to *Catastrophe*. Just as Vanek’s tendency to remain distant and guarded tends to highlight the superficiality of the worldviews of his interlocutors, so P’s passivity and silence throughout the majority of the play exposes the emptiness of the rhetoric of D and A and the cruelty in the way that they manipulate his body. More importantly, just as Vanek tends ultimately to engage with his interlocutors in a way that could be interpreted as capitulation to their demands, and just as Gross’s attempts at unequivocal

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<sup>181</sup> Havel, *The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). The title is a play on Lord Butler’s memoir *The Art of the Possible*, which rehearses a number of familiar tropes around the notion of *Realpolitik*. Butler, *The Art of the Possible* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971).

protest are somewhat inept and quickly manipulated by Ballas, so P's final gesture of raising his head and silencing a "[d]istant storm of applause" ultimately seems to conform to the expectations of D and A (*CDW*, 461). Reportedly, for Beckett, P's final gesture was an unambiguous gesture of protest: "He's saying, you bastards, you haven't finished me yet" (quoted in Knowlson, 680). Yet like Vanek's "It's all a bloody mess," P's gesture, however unambiguous his intentions, lends itself to appropriation and re-interpretation within other contexts.

In the very moment that P "*fixes*" the audience with his gaze, for instance, he inadvertently participates in creating the very effect that D had hoped to create, albeit in a manner that is probably too explicit for D's liking (*CDW*, 461). Earlier in the play, when A suggests to D, "What if he were to [...] raise his head?," D's rejection of that possibility reflects not a rejection of the meaning it might aim to convey, but rather a sensitivity to the context of performance: "Where do you think we are? In Patagonia? [...] For God's sake!" (*CDW*, 460). D points out that this play is not being staged in a contextual vacuum—and here I read "in Patagonia" as analogous to "on the moon"—and it seems to be D's knowledge of his specific audience that leads him to dismiss A's idea. The phrase "for God's sake" is the same phrase he uses to reject A's idea that P be fitted with a gag, a decision based on the feeling that a gag would be too on the nose—"This craze for explicitation!" (*CDW*, 459)—not because it would contravene his own vision of his "catastrophe."<sup>182</sup> The audience, D assumes, will get the idea thanks to a shared set of codes and conventions.

This complacency is well founded, for ingrained expectations related to social structures such as gender and class hierarchies are shown to be all-encompassing. D, in fur coat and toque and smoking a cigar, clearly represents a wealthy member of the ruling class, hence his demand,

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<sup>182</sup> Ironically, a poster bearing an image of Beckett himself with a gag in his mouth would serve as anti-government propaganda shortly before the Velvet Revolution. Underneath the image was the caption, "If Samuel Beckett had been born in Czechoslovakia we'd still be waiting for Godot." See Octavian Saiu, "Samuel Beckett behind the Iron Curtain: The Reception in Eastern Europe," in *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman (New York: Continuum, 2009), 255.

“Step on it, I have a caucus” (*CDW*, 458). Such demands are passed along to his female assistant, A, who is expected to accept D’s instructions without question. The very fact that the theater seems not to be heated reflects the arrogance with which the likes of D approach the medium. It is evidently regarded as unworthy of too much attention or investment, as merely another means of disseminating official doctrine from above, as something that can be dealt with swiftly and without much debate. The decision to whiten of all of P’s exposed flesh further suggests how P is being metaphorically “ossified,” to borrow Havel’s description in “The Power of the Powerless” of a system in which “there is practically no way for [...] nonconformity to be implemented within [...] official structures” (36). P is being turned into a statue, or perhaps a skeleton, that will be manipulated to reinforce existing power structures. Even his attempt at free expression is interpretable within such structures. When he does raise his head, he might be saying, “You bastards, you haven’t finished me yet,” but his audience remains free to decide for itself who the “bastards” are.

P’s inability to protest unequivocally and on his own terms is an important thread linking a play as apparently anomalous as *Catastrophe to Eleutheria*, in which Victor, despite his best efforts, proves to be incapable of doing anything but conforming to the demands made of him by others. Just as the narrator of *The Unnamable* deplores a mania for explanations, Victor despises and feels distanced from a “mania” on the part of his family, acquaintances, and even spectator characters, “to understand a life like [his]” (*EL*, 144). Yet from the start, *Eleutheria* makes clear that Victor will always serve as fodder for conversations that seem to take little notice of his manifest desire to have no part in them. The very setup of the first act of the play demonstrates how even his withdrawal will continue to be subject to multiple interpretations and debates on the part of his family. His “marginal action”—sitting on the bed, standing up, “pac[ing] up and down,” but mostly “stay[ing] where he is” (*EL*, 7)—is seemingly aimless and directionless, but it nevertheless provides a visual focal point for the conversation about him

taking place on the other half of the stage, in the Kraps' salon. Such conversations even seem as if they might dry up were it *not* for the subject of Victor's withdrawal. Neither recent marriages nor impending deaths challenge the Kraps' conception of what a respectable life should be, and the conversation fizzles out quickly when talk turns to those subjects. It is only after Mme Piouk breaks a silence with the line, "We were talking about Victor," that the conversation becomes lively again, animated with outrage (*El*, 21). Victor, like Vanek, seems to challenge the hollowness of other characters' worldviews, but also like Vanek, he ultimately only leads other characters to affirm those worldviews more passionately. Victor, too, is inescapably in the world, despite his unwillingness to accept it.

The comic naïveté of his attempt at withdrawal is made particularly clear in a speech in which he articulates his own vision of freedom. This speech that might be described as his own attempt to speak from the terrain of his authentic existence:

You accept it when someone is beyond life, or when life is beyond you, and that people can refuse to compromise with life if they are prepared to pay the price and give up their liberty. He's abdicated, he's dead, he's mad, he's got faith, got cancer. Nothing wrong with that. But not to be one of you through being free, that's a disgrace and a scandal.  
[...] Your own liberty is so miserable! (*El*, 148)

Yet Victor is not free. He only delivers this impassioned tirade after the spectator threatens to have him tortured unless he explains himself. Like P's gesture of raising his head, this monologue can ultimately be made to conform to audience expectations in the act of challenging them. As with Josef Gross's speech about "becoming fully human," Victor's logic here is so convoluted and vague as to be laughable.

Within *Elentheria*, invocations of the concepts of liberty and freedom are as ironic as Victor's name. Victor seems to consider himself free because the motive for his withdrawal from

“life” is indescribable in readymade terms, yet the spectator is evidently able to form a conclusive interpretation: “What you have said makes sense,” he says to Victor (*EL*, 149). What is particularly telling is the spectator’s reply to Victor’s question, “Can you really take account of what I say under constraint?”: “We have already settled that question. In your absence” (*EL*, 148–49). Victor’s own beliefs, his own intentions, are irrelevant to the terms of the debate to which he is subjected. Even Victor’s final, silent gesture at the end of the play—his “turning his emaciated back on humanity” (*EL*, 170)—which seems an absolute rejection of the conventions of life and of theater, is interpretable as compliance with them. He has evidently made a choice to continue leading his withdrawn life, and in so doing he has resolved the very conflict that has driven much of the action of the play: namely, the question of whether or not he would be reformed.

Victor and P seem incapable of adhering to normal social codes in a way that resonates with several other moments in Beckett’s work, moments in which the silence or inertia of his characters is shown to be symptomatic of the fact that those figures are incapable of normal sociable behavior. One paradigmatic example of this occurs just before Molloy’s “golden moment,” when a police officer asks Molloy for identification, and Molloy, confused and uncomprehending, presents only a bit of newspaper soiled with his feces (*T*, 20). Molloy’s very chronicle could be compared to that bit of soiled paper: he presents both in accordance with the demand that he present something, but it would seem foolish to attempt to read meaning into either. Yet such indications of Molloy’s absolute penury—in the sense of his literal lack of material means and in the sense of his lack of understanding of the most basic conventions of human interaction—form part of a deliberate protest on the part of the narrative. That is, the

work must understand the conventions of human interaction (as illustrated through the expectations of the policeman) in order to imply, via the figure of Molloy, that it does not.<sup>183</sup>

This is a tactic that is perhaps most effective in performance, since the constant presence of a withdrawn character can serve as a constant visual reminder of the vacuity of the dialogue that swirls around him. This intended effect might be one way of understanding Beckett's putative contribution of Horace Egosmith to Mary Manning's *Youth's the Season...?*, particularly with regard to the party scene in which Egosmith's silence, a seeming result of his shyness more than of any tactical maneuvering, offers a quasi-moral (or at least non-immoral) counterpoint to the scandalous confessions he elicits from nearly everyone present.<sup>184</sup> That tactic also seems particularly evident in Beckett's *Rough for Theatre II*, in which the silence and full-back posture of C casts him as wholly removed from the apparently hollow ground on which the calculations of A and B rest. It is always identifiable as a tactic, however, by which a play strives to achieve a certain effect on an audience. *Eleutheria* and *Catastrophe* have explicitly self-reflexive structures that make particularly obvious this connection between the withdrawal of a protagonist and the affected withdrawal of the work from conventions of performance, as dictated by the imagined expectations of specific audiences.

### What Theater-Goers Want

Havel was sensitive to those sorts of expectations. He stated that *Audience* revealed to him that he “really must write for a concrete audience” (quoted in Rocamora, 160)—and all three of the

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<sup>183</sup> John Bolin offers a similar reading when he invokes Molloy as a paradigmatic example of a modernist “idiot” protagonist who challenges “the category of the useful.” See Bolin, “Modernism, Idiocy, and the Work of Culture: J. M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*,” *Modernism/modernity* 22, no. 2 (April 2015): 361.

<sup>184</sup> See Mary Manning, *Youth's the Season...?*, in *Plays of Changing Ireland*, ed. Curtis Canfield (New York: MacMillan, 1936), 321–404. On the difficulty of determining how much of Egosmith Beckett is responsible for, and on the resonances between Manning’s play and *Eleutheria*, see Emilie Morin, “Odds, Ends, and Beginnings,” 218–19.

Vanek plays seem designed both to edify and to challenge the ideology of the types of audiences before which they would be performed. *Audience* was written for “an annual gathering of writers” at Havel’s country house in Hrádeček (Rocamora, 148). Although at one level the play seems to offer encouragement to writers struggling with state censorship and censure, at another level it seems aimed to challenge writers who might see an aesthetic sensibility as superior to that of the average worker. Despite that latent critique of its own audience, the play was a great success (Rocamora, 159). As if to drive the point home more forcefully, *Unveiling* critiques the consumerist impulses underlying the ambitions of the aesthete class. *Unveiling*, too, was very popular, especially abroad (Rocamora, 159–60). As if in response to a feeling of moral superiority on the part of Western liberal audiences who might imaginatively align themselves with Vanek, *Protest* affiliates Vanek’s steadfastness with a particular type of naïve idealism.

In a similar way, Beckett’s plays often seem designed both to relate to specific audiences and to challenge the terms of that relation. *En attendant Godot*, despite the timeless, placeless quality suggested by its repetitions and mostly barren set, suggests the French context in which it was originally performed:

Vladimir: C’est trop pour un seul homme. [...] D’un autre côté, à quoi bon se décourager à présent, voilà ce que je me dis. Il fallait y penser il y a une éternité, vers 1900. [...] La main dans la main on se serait jeté en bas de la tour Eiffel, parmi les premiers.<sup>185</sup>

This comment seems designed to resonate with a middle-class, middle-aged Parisian audience in the late 1940s, who having been born at the turn of the century could presumably confirm the fact that after the Great Depression, two world wars, and the Holocaust, the fin-de-siècle era did indeed seem to be an eternity away. Alongside the nostalgia invited by that sentiment, however,

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<sup>185</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot/En Attendant Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 4. Rendered in the English *Godot* as follows: “It’s too much for one man. [...] On the other hand, what’s the good of losing heart now, that’s what I say. We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties. [...] Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first.” Beckett, *Waiting for Godot/En Attendant Godot*, 5.



is a form of critique. Vladimir's wish that he and Estragon had thrown themselves from the Eiffel Tower before the horrors began seems calculated to scandalize *Godot's* audience, to imply that things have only gone downhill since they were born. On a very different note, but in a way that is similarly geared towards a specific audience, *Ohio Impromptu*, which Beckett wrote to be performed at an Ohio State University symposium held in honor of his seventy-fifth birthday, both encourages and gently pokes fun at the forms of close reading practiced by its anticipated academic audience: the listener's intense attention to what the reader reads is ethically admirable, but it also comes off as a bit misguided given the opening line, "Little is left to tell" (*CDW*, 445). In a sense, Beckett may be parodying the legacy of the critical success of *Waiting for Godot* here. This opening line resonates with *Godot's* opening line "Nothing to be done," yet (as the Ohio State symposium demonstrates) that opening declaration of the play's lack of content did little to stymie critical discussion. Both plays launch similar types of critiques, but each seems calibrated, with equal measures of kindness and censure, to the expectations of a particular demographic. *Eleutheria* and *Catastrophe* are especially explicit in this regard. Both use comically determinate metatheatrical devices, directly invoking the conventions and codes around theater in ways that render their instances of self-reflexiveness especially heavy-handed and pointed.

In many ways, *Eleutheria*, even more explicitly than *Godot*, addresses itself to a middle-class French audience still scarred by the horrors of the Second World War. Victor's very name, of course, calls to mind the rhetoric of the victory of humanity described in the previous chapter, with his surname passing rather obvious judgement on that rhetoric. The play also invokes the specter of Nazism in several places, for example when Dr. Piouk elaborates his ridiculous plan for how to "solve" the problem of humanity, which amounts to a disturbingly well-organized procedure for eliminating the human race that calls to mind the ruthless efficiency of Nazi death camps (*El*, 44–45). The laughter that could be inspired by Piouk's plan might be hollowed out by the knowledge of widespread collaboration with the Nazis in Vichy France, and a similar hollow

laughter might be inspired when the spectator, who claims to be “not just one” but “a thousand spectators” (*EL*, 128), proves equally un-averse to the use of violence:

Glazier: We can't torture him.

Spectator: Why not?

Glazier: It's not done.

Spectator: Since when? (*EL*, 141)

Even the Glazier's objection that “it's not done” seems dubious, as it is based less on ethical conviction and more on a sense of bourgeois respectability. Other references to recent events, such as Mme Meck's comment, “drawing on military tradition,” that her late husband's “dying breath was for France,” or such as Jacques's question to M. Krap, “What does monsieur think of the new government?,” to which M. Krap responds, “No, no, not that,” indicate a work that anticipates its audience's concerns and predispositions and then tries to subvert expectations based on them.

Those expectations might be better understood with reference to the legacy of self-reflexive plays that came to prominence in interwar Europe. The comparison between such plays and Beckett's work is a common one dating back to the 1960s. Esslin addresses Antonin Artaud, Apollinaire, and Pirandello in his book on the theatre of the absurd tradition that he claims includes Beckett.<sup>186</sup> Abel also mentions Pirandello as a metatheatrical playwright in the same way that he argues Beckett is (158–60, 164). Ruby Cohn draws parallels between interwar French Surrealist theater and Beckett's plays.<sup>187</sup> Yet Beckett might not so much belong to such traditions as invoke them in a comic vein in order to highlight how their apparently subversive

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<sup>186</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 40, 351–55, 370–75.

<sup>187</sup> Cohn, “Surrealism and Today's French Theatre,” *Yale French Studies* 31 (1964): 159–65.

experimentalism could be made to conform to existing frameworks. Consider, for example, Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the bewildering self-reflexiveness of which caused something of a controversy when it premiered in Rome in 1921, with its illogical structure reportedly drawing jeers from the audience. Despite this initial outrage, the play proved a "triumph" a few months later when a Milan audience who "had had time to read the text" viewed the play "in religious silence": by 1927, it had been performed in "every major city in Europe as well as in New York, Buenos Aires, and Tokyo."<sup>188</sup> In 1925, Pirandello himself wrote a preface to the play in which he claimed that despite its eccentricities it nevertheless contains a "universal meaning," that it conforms to rather than undermines the expectation that theater ought to convey coherent ideas or truths.<sup>189</sup> To this day, Pirandello's preface offers an attractive framework to editors and translators wishing to present the play to a general audience—despite its bold, avant-garde experimentalism—as a modern classic.<sup>190</sup>

Even more relevant is Apollinaire's 1917 play *The Breasts of Tiresias*, with its prologue that blurs the line between the fictional space of the performance and the nonfictional space of the auditorium when the director character addresses the audience in verse before the play proper begins—"here I am once more among you."<sup>191</sup> This play was reconceived as an opera in 1945 by Francis Poulenc, and it premiered at the Opéra-Comique in Paris in June 1947, just four months after Beckett completed *Eleutheria*, so the resonance between the two works may be more than

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<sup>188</sup> Gaspare Giudice, *Pirandello: A Biography*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 115–17.

<sup>189</sup> Pirandello, introduction to *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, trans. Felicity Firth, in *Pirandello: Collected Plays*, vol. 2 (London: John Calder, 1988), xv.

<sup>190</sup> See for example Frederick May, introduction to *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, trans. May (London: Heinemann, 1954), v–x; the anonymous introduction to the Penguin edition of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (London: Penguin, 1995), ix–xvi; and Robert Ritety, introduction to *Pirandello: Collected Plays*, vol. 2, vii–xi.

<sup>191</sup> Apollinaire, *The Breasts of Tiresias* (1917), trans. Louis Simpson, in *Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance*, eds. Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeney (New York: Routledge, 2010), 208. The play was originally composed in 1903, but it was not performed until 1917, at which time this prologue was added. See Wilfrid Mellers, *Francis Poulenc* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 98.

coincidental (assuming Beckett was aware of the forthcoming production in early 1947).<sup>192</sup> Both plays seem to take the relationship between performance and audience as their central concern, and in both, that relationship is shown to have been shaken by the trauma of world war. As Pirandello did for *Six Characters*, the director character of *The Breasts of Tiresias* explains that his production is designed to strengthen or renew that relationship: addressing his remarks to survivors of the Great War, he says that his play “aims to reform society,” that it will “above all try to entertain” so that the audience “will be inclined to profit / From all the lessons that the play contains.”<sup>193</sup> Such justifications of seemingly useless or incomprehensible forms of artistic expression hark back at least as far as the sixteenth century, when Sir Philip Sydney argued that the purpose of “poesy” was to “delight and instruct,” and perhaps much farther than that, since Sydney is echoing Horace here.

That notion might have seemed especially bankrupt after artistic attempts at social renewal had failed to prevent a second world war, with significance or meaning seeming to be only synonyms for (rather than complements to) profit and entertainment. *Eleutheria* engages with this legacy in cynical fashion: what Pirandello and Apollinaire presented as open-mindedness it tends to present as closed-mindedness. With its multiple, mocking references to the shallowness of the presumption that theater ought to entertain, it bemoans the ease with which subversive experimentation can be turned into simple entertainment.<sup>194</sup> Dr. Piouk comments to M. Krap, “If you make a little effort, you might manage to keep the punters amused” (*El*, 33). M. Krap insists that Mlle Skunk sits where the audience can see her, since “she has a place” in the play “only in so far as she displays her charms” (*El*, 38). Victor warns the

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<sup>192</sup> Gale and Deeney, introduction to *The Breasts of Tiresias*, in *Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook*, 207. John Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 100. See also Mellers, *Francis Poulenc*, 98.

<sup>193</sup> Apollinaire, *The Breasts of Tiresias*, 208. As Mellers argues, “No one doubted at the time of the première [of the opera adaptation of the play], [...] [that it] was [still] pertinent to social life in the late 1940s” (98).

<sup>194</sup> By 1956, Roland Barthes would predict that Beckett’s plays were destined for a similar fate: he wrote gloomily that “the bourgeoisie [would] [...] ultimately [put] on splendid evenings of Beckett.” Barthes, “Whose Theater? Whose *Avant-Garde?*,” in *Roland Barthes: Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (1956; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 69.

Glazier that his explanation of himself will be “boring,” which the Glazier describes as matter more “serious” than whether Victor’s explanation has any truth to it (*EL*, 143). In this context, Victor’s impassioned tirade to the spectator, in which he equates liberty with compromise, calls to mind the many Nazi collaborators who continued to enjoy successful political careers under de Gaulle.<sup>195</sup> Similarly, Victor’s final, silent turning of his back at the end of the play might constitute not only a rejection of the conventions of theater, but also a sign of frustration with French postwar audiences themselves.

In a similar manner, *Catastrophe* addresses the context in which it would first be staged in a way that seems aimed both to give the Avignon audience what it would expect—namely, a statement of unequivocal solidarity with Havel—and to scandalize, or at least challenge, that audience by flagging up the ethical problems inherent in asking Beckett to speak for Havel. Given the strangeness of the initial image of the black-clad body on stage, the play within *Catastrophe* can be seen as a riff on pieces such as *Ohio Impromptu*. The pre-recorded storm of applause seems a dramatized version of the applause that such plays regularly received and of the almost certain applause with which *Catastrophe* would be met at the Avignon Festival. In an interview for the *Guardian*, James Knowlson argues that *Catastrophe* demonstrates that “however much you reduce somebody to an object, a victim, there is resilience and persistence.”<sup>196</sup> The “Night for Václav Havel” may itself have threatened to reduce Havel to an object or victim, and *Catastrophe* critiques this tendency for Havel to be used as a “poster boy” for Western moral superiority.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> See Golsan, “The Body in the Basement,” introduction to *Vichy’s Afterlife*, 1–23.

<sup>196</sup> Knowlson quoted in Jo Glanville, “‘Godot is here’: How Samuel Beckett and Vaclav Havel Changed History,” *Guardian*, 15 September 2009, <[theguardian.com/culture/2009/sep/15/vaclev-havel-samuel-beckett-catastrophe](http://theguardian.com/culture/2009/sep/15/vaclev-havel-samuel-beckett-catastrophe)>.

<sup>197</sup> Michelle Woods uses the term “poster boy” to describe how Havel came to stand in the West for Western conceptions of free speech. Woods, *Censoring Translation: Censorship, Theatre, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Continuum, 2012), xiii.

At first glance, the director's presumably costly fur coat and toque, when noted alongside the fact that his position as director seems directly linked to his political position, can invite perceptions that the play is set in an official state theater in Czechoslovakia. This would imply that P's final stare, and indeed *Catastrophe* itself, is directed against Czechoslovak authorities. (This seems the interpretation espoused by Simek, who would have been particularly sensitive to such implications.) In other ways, however, the play suggests a Western setting. The only named character is the lighting engineer Luke: this is a name with cognates in Slavic languages, but given the fact that it derives from the Greek for "light giving," its Western origin seems to acquire a special significance here. D's comment upon finishing the piece—"There's our catastrophe, in the bag" (*CDW*, 460)—uses the language of consumerism to describe what he sees as the achievement of the play. Like Havel's *Vanek* plays, this play seems designed to critique, at least in part, an imagined tendency on the part of Westerners and dissidents to view themselves as beyond reproach.<sup>198</sup>

This is a problem that Havel had addressed in "The Power of the Powerless." He had come to perceive and resent that the nuances of his own plays were being suppressed due to an increasing tendency to read them through the lens of his ever-growing international reputation as a dissident. That resentment surfaces repeatedly in "The Power of the Powerless" despite the fact that the essay's primary target is the ideology of the Czechoslovak government:

Regardless of their actual vocations, [...] [so-called dissidents] are talked about in the West more frequently in terms of their activities as committed citizens, or in terms of the critical, political aspects of their work, than in terms of the "real" work they do in their own fields. From personal experience, I know that there is an invisible line you cross—without even wanting to or becoming aware of it—beyond which they cease to treat you

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<sup>198</sup> For a detailed reading of how *Catastrophe* challenges the politics of sympathy and advocacy at a more fundamental level, see Jim Hansen, "Samuel Beckett's *Catastrophe* and the Theater of Pure Means," *Contemporary Literature* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 660–82.

as a writer who happens to be a concerned citizen and begin talking of you as a “dissident” who almost incidentally (in his or her spare time, perhaps?) happens to write plays as well. (77)

It is telling here that Havel singles out the West. His relative silence with regard to Western politics, he seems to suspect, has been complacently interpreted in the West as a sign that he does not find much to criticize there.

This is a suspicion that surfaces elsewhere in Havel’s essay, and it reinforces his sense of anxiety surrounding the myriad ways in which his words, and even silences, can be appropriated and interpreted in differing contexts. To be sure, Havel’s essay focuses almost exclusively on a critique of the hollow rhetoric and pregnant silences of what he calls the “post-totalitarian system” in his home country. An extremely sophisticated and flexible structure and ideology, he argues, leads to a situation in which power is not perpetuated by a “ruling clique” but rather by a “blind *automatism*,” a situation in which individuals of all levels find it easier to profess a false faith in official ideology rather than to point out its obvious faults (43–44). For Havel, even passive toleration of this situation means that “individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, *are* the system” (45). But alongside that (necessarily) near-exclusive focus is an anxiety about the essay’s relative silence on issues relating to Western capitalist ideology. In addition to his complaint about how he is “talked about in the West,” Havel makes occasional but pointed remarks that seem aimed to short-circuit complacency on the part of Western readers. He states that the system in place in Czechoslovakia constitutes “simply another form of consumer and industrial society” (40). It is “built on foundations laid by the historical encounter between dictatorship and the consumer society” and thus might “stand [...] as a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies” (54). For Havel, the “most essential matter,” defined via Heidegger as the “crisis of contemporary technological society as a whole” in which “technology [...] has enslaved [humanity],” is “also taking place in the Western world,

the only difference being the social and political forms it takes” (114–15). Havel seems to suspect that in the bipolar rhetoric of the Cold War, criticism of one political system is easily interpreted as support of the opposing system. He carefully attempts to articulate his mistrust of both by arguing that the only ethical critique must be articulated from outside of this dualist framework.

With this in mind, if P is still taken to be a stand-in for Havel, it is possible to interpret D and A as stand-ins for the organizers of the AIDA event. The way that D and A treat P could reflect the way those organizers were presenting Havel on a world stage as a symbol of Western liberal conceptions of human rights. This is not to cast aspersions on Beckett’s fundamental support for Havel or for the cause of AIDA more generally. By 1982, Beckett was a Nobel Prize winner whose reputation was well established, and he must have realized that the mere inclusion of his name on the bill could only add to the cultural legitimacy of the Night for Havel. Beckett even offers a dramatic counterpoint to the self-interested waffling of Stanek in *Protest*, whose litany of convoluted logical leaps manages to obscure the obvious self-interest at the root of his justification for not contributing his name to Vanek’s open letter of protest. Nevertheless, *Catastrophe* can offer a critique of its interpreters in Avignon in its subversion of the idea that any consistent, didactic position is possible with regard to Havel’s imprisonment.

That critique is suggested by how uneasily the play sits with the expectations of AIDA founder Ariane Mnouchkine. She “rejects the activist aesthetic, which [...] dooms theatre to sink into realism,” and she maintains,

The function of theatre is to bring people pleasure. It is also moral, educational. It must lead people to think. [...] The point is to embody in poetic form a current, contemporary fact, giving it sufficient weight after the manner of a metaphorical fable.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Ariane Mnouchkine, quoted in Bérénice Hamidi-Kim, “The Théâtre Du Soleil’s Trajectory from ‘People’s Theatre’ to ‘Citizen Theatre’: Involvement or Renunciation?,” in *Political Performances: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan C. Haedicke, Deirdre Heddon, Avraham Oz, and E. J. Westlake (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 82.



Like Pirandello, and like Apollinaire's director character, Mnouchkine is happy to imply that the function of artistic expression is to delight and instruct. The hierarchy of values in *Catastrophe*, on the other hand, seems to invert those articulated by Mnouchkine. The play is not particularly concerned about "sink[ing] into realism," as it stages a relatively realistic situation, itself. The idea that "theatre is [there] to bring people pleasure" is especially at odds with the silencing of the fictional applause at the end of the play. That applause would presumably amount to the fictional audience having their own preformed value systems confirmed in "the manner of a metaphorical fable," and its silencing seems to condemn them to leave the theater without having anything at all confirmed.

That result, however, might be a mere fantasy, as an alternative, if tenuous, interpretation of the ending can make clear. It seems possible to conclude that the applause "falters" and "dies" of its own accord. The fictional audience might be conceived as simply taking the stillness of P's gaze as a sign that the play is over, that its point has been made. They could be imagined going about their evenings, perhaps with the nagging feeling that the protagonist's raising of his head was a bit of a heavy-handed touch, but nevertheless taking home with them "a wider and loftier meaning [...] along with the programme and the choc-ice," as Beckett sarcastically puts it in his introduction to the 1952 broadcast of *En attendant Godot* (LII, 316). The actual, intended effect of P's protest is entirely irrelevant in this scenario. While this interpretation might seem a particularly egregious travesty of the spirit of the play, it has the advantage of describing what in all likelihood will be the actual reaction of the literal audience within the theater. As re-stagings of *Catastrophe* have made clear, the play indeed has the propensity to give theater-goers what they want, to fit with expectations that theater exists to entertain and to edify. *Eleutheria*, too, has manifestly failed to fail to pique the interests of directors and audiences, as evidenced by the various, semi-illicit productions of it. Yet hints within the scripts suggest how such contradictions might continue to be negotiated.

## The Withdrawal of the Playwright

Both plays pass ironic commentary on the parts of a production over which the playwright has little control, highlighting the sway that performers, directors, technicians, and audiences will have over the finished product. In the midst of such confusion, the playwright seems to have washed his hands of the whole scenario in order to subvert, pre-emptively, attempts to find an intended meaning within the production, which will always be a creative adaptation. In *Eleutheria*, the inevitability of such adaptation is suggested most explicitly (and comically) when the prompter character suddenly interjects, “That’s it! That’s the end! You’re not following the script!” and later, when the spectator looks at the script the prompter has left behind and reads out the name of the playwright—“Beckett (*he says Béké*), Samuel, Béké, Béké” (*El*, 132, 136).<sup>200</sup> “Beckett” would seem to have lost all control of the events onstage, and yet the action continues (in the Faber and Faber edition) for another thirty-five pages. While the spectator’s Gallicized pronunciation of Beckett’s name might seem to constitute another jab at the audience for its ignorance of other cultures and languages, the Glazier’s subsequent jab at Beckett—“Never heard of him. Seems he eats his soup with a fork” (*El*, 136)—demonstrates a certain degree of self-mockery that would indeed seem to grant more agency to collaborators in the theater.

*Eleutheria* further highlights the necessary influence that actors and directors will have over a play by including stage directions that make certain parts of the play literally impossible, rather than merely almost impossible, to adhere to faithfully. At one point, for example, Mme Meck is described as “*making an indescribable movement*,” something that would seem unperformable (*El*, 15). Victor is described as delivering his tirade about freedom “*incoherently*,” an adverb that makes little sense as an instruction to an actor (*El*, 148). These kinds of stage directions take to an extreme the tactics employed even in the most outrageous stage direction of

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<sup>200</sup> In the French, this line reads, “Beckett (*il dit: ‘Béquet’*) Samuel, Béquet, Béquet.” Beckett, *Eleutheria* (Paris: Minuit, 1995), 136.

*The Breasts of Tiresias*, which dictates that Thérèse's breasts "fly off, like toy balloons, but remain attached by strings."<sup>201</sup> This could conceivably still be interpreted for the stage (albeit with difficulty), as could the outlandish stage directions in Artaud's play *The Spurt of Blood* (1925), which among other things demand that stars collide onstage and that entire buildings fall from above.<sup>202</sup> *Eleutheria*, on the other hand, includes directions that are un-performable by definition. It seems to force the point that liberties will have to be taken in performance. The play's gigantic, extravagant set might even be interpreted in this way. As Knowlson points out, the set described in *Eleutheria*'s script would have been prohibitively costly for the types of theaters to which it would have been pitched (366).

If *Eleutheria* uses impossible stage directions as a challenge to the notion that it could ever be staged faithfully, *Catastrophe* uses subtler forms of self-reflexiveness in order to anticipate how actors and directors were likely to stage it in a way other than as dictated by the script. The script for the performance that D stages is nowhere to be seen, and all of his instructions to A—"Lose that gown"; "Down the head"; "Bare the neck"; "And whiten" (*CDW*, 458–60)—presumably have more to do with achieving his own dramatic vision, with highlighting P's helplessness and innocence, than with staging the playwright's more enigmatic and less readily comprehensible vision of a single figure clad all in black. This lends a particular form of humor to the play, with D engaging in precisely the type of alterations that would presumably outrage Beckett if D were staging his play. *Catastrophe* might even be seen as an invitation to a director to stage Beckett's work as he or she pleases. The playwright, admitting an inability to prescribe a precise, unambiguously subversive event, abdicates responsibility entirely. The play itself, conceived as an abstract, coherent entity, is presented as a fantasy or phantasm, a vanishing point or a hollow center, with different performances relating to one another only in tangential fashion.

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<sup>201</sup> Apollinaire, *The Breasts of Tiresias*, 210.

<sup>202</sup> See Artaud, *The Spurt of Blood* (1925), trans. Victor Corti, in the *Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook*, 219–21.

Such ironic self-reflexiveness might suggest that a director wishing to remain faithful to Beckett's vision would refuse, as far as possible, to accept such invitations to deviate from the script or to interpret it creatively. Yet it seems just as tenable to argue that innovative practitioners such as Akalaitis and Simek have responded to Beckett's plays particularly appropriately. For just as Beckett's writings on art necessarily relate only tangentially to the inexplicable works on which they are based, Akalaitis's and Simek's productions of Beckett's works might maintain a spirit of reverence for the putative uninterpretability of their source. The fact that Beckett's plays, like Havel's, seem designed to critique the interpretative touchstones of particular audiences suggests that today, when Beckett looms as large as ever in cultural centers such as London, creative, even cavalier alterations to plays such as *Catastrophe* might constitute the only way of resisting the wholesale recuperation of his work within complacent industries. What needs to be challenged, it seems, is a certain unreflective adherence to the expectation that theater must deepen and ultimately confirm audiences' existing understandings of the world or of life. ("We walk out of the theatre knowing we've been given one more chance to live," raves one review of Lisa Dwan's version of *Not I*.)<sup>203</sup> Wild alterations to Beckett's scripts would combat the tendency to revere him in quasi-religious terms—as a "fiery apostle" or as a "saint"—a tendency compounded by the coincidence that he was born on Good Friday and died shortly before Christmas. Such alterations would treat his scripts as profane, worldly documents, rather than quasi-mystical indices of a transcendent, piercing vision. And even if such productions were to fail miserably, if they were to prove enormous flops in either aesthetic or financial terms—or in both—they would nevertheless aim to escape a state of affairs in which fidelity to a playwright's intention, aesthetic success, and profitability are routinely conflated.

These issues lie at the heart of ongoing legal and ethical debates among Beckett's editors, publishers, and literary executors, with all claiming to be concerned with how or whether Beckett

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<sup>203</sup> Lyn Gardner, production review of *Not I*, Royal Court Theatre, London, *Guardian*, 22 May 2013, <[theguardian.com/stage/2013/may/22/not-i-review](http://theguardian.com/stage/2013/may/22/not-i-review)>.

would have allowed his plays to be performed. They offer more or less the main criteria by which to judge the quality of individual productions, and accusations of financial self-interest are occasionally levelled at those who seem to take differing approaches (see, for example, Lindon, 10). Yet Beckett's intentions are hard to pin down. As Rosset notes in the preface to his version of *Eleutheria*, Beckett was constantly re-evaluating his own works.<sup>204</sup> He also regularly re-worked sections of his plays: the auditor in *Not I*, for example, was ultimately dropped from the play altogether, and the number of leaves on the tree of *Waiting for Godot* was adjusted numerous times over the course of its performance.<sup>205</sup> These re-writings and difficulties have led to a unique situation in which even editors and publishers have found themselves embroiled in situations in which they feel obliged to speak for Beckett after his death. In so doing, they take on a role that would traditionally fall exclusively to literary estates, and they face ethical conundrums similar to those faced by Beckett when he was asked to speak for Havel.

What the notion of safeguarding Beckett's dramatic vision can overlook, however, is the history of self-parody and self-satire within Beckett's very work, where authorial intentions seem irrelevant to the act of interpretation because they are presented as non-existent. Such parody and satire can arise even without Beckett's explicit intent. Victor's plight in *Eleutheria* ironically resonates with the present situation in which a deceased playwright cannot escape those who wish to assign meaning and value even to those of his works that he came to dismiss. Contemporary productions of *Eleutheria* could conceivably emphasize this irony, which would only highlight the absurdity of the concept of absolute fidelity to a script. A number of critics are beginning to suspect that an insistence on a certain standard of fidelity to a published master-text risks allowing Beckett's work to become ossified, freezing it arbitrarily in a particular time and place in a way that undermines its ability to engage with the expectations of changing audiences.

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<sup>204</sup> Rosset, introduction, v.

<sup>205</sup> See Van Hulle, *Manuscript Genetics*, 125.

A recent review of a relatively straight production of *Endgame* in Melbourne complains, “We’ve been exposed to Beckett in this precise form for 50 years so the style no longer surprises. Its once-fresh tricks have been so imitated across the culture they’ve become stale clichés.”<sup>206</sup> In a similar vein, Nicholas Johnson argues that the analog technology of *Krapp’s Last Tape* is a “misleading signifier for the new and coming Beckett audience.” Current productions of the play, he contends, ought to update the technology in order to make sure that it still seems to be set in the future.<sup>207</sup> What I hope to have added to the discussion is the observation that Beckett’s plays, like Havel’s, often speak to specific, concrete audiences in order to try to subvert their expectations. Subsequent updatings could still be said to remain faithful to the spirit of the works if they pursue similar ends.

In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel offers a description of an ideal form of government that could offer a useful model for an ideal type of performance practice. In opposition to the “post-totalitarian system,” Havel envisions a “‘post-democratic’ system”:

There can and must be structures that are open, dynamic and small. [...] There must be structures that in principle place no limits on the genesis of different structures. Any accumulation of power whatsoever (one of the characteristics of automatism) should be profoundly alien. [...] Their authority certainly cannot be based on long-empty traditions, [...] but rather on how, in concrete terms, they enter into a given situation. Rather than a strategic agglomeration of formalized organizations, it is better to have organizations springing up *ad hoc*, infused with enthusiasm for a particular purpose and disappearing when that purpose has been achieved. (118)

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<sup>206</sup> Van Badham, “Endgame review—innovation choked by Samuel Beckett’s strict staging edicts,” production review of *Endgame*, Southbank Theatre, Melbourne, dir. Sam Strong, *Guardian*, 6 April 2015, <[theguardian.com/culture/2015/apr/06/endgame-review-innovation-choked-by-samuel-becketts-strict-staging-edicts](http://theguardian.com/culture/2015/apr/06/endgame-review-innovation-choked-by-samuel-becketts-strict-staging-edicts)>.

<sup>207</sup> Nicholas Johnson, “Analogue Krapp in a Digital Culture,” production review of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, 28 April 2010, Gate Theatre, Dublin, dir. Michael Golgon, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 20, no. 2 (September 2011): 218–19.

The 1990 performance of *Catastrophe* at the John Houseman studio in New York enters into the specific situation of Western perceptions of post-revolution Czechoslovakia, since the playing of the national anthem over the end of the play could be perceived as deeply ironic given the treatment to which P has just been subjected. It even resonates with the stage directions that indicate that Karel Gott's version of "Sugar Baby Love" be played at the end of Havel's *Unveiling*. In both instances, the uplifting nature of the song would seem to exist in a bitterly ironic tension with the events of the play itself. The quasi-illegitimate performances of *Eleutheria* described by Tucker also find affiliations with Havel's post-democratic system. They have mostly taken place in private locations, quite literally springing up ad hoc. If the Beckett Estate were to grant carte blanche for performances of *Eleutheria*, however, then such readings would lose their subversive aspect and would have to be abandoned in favor of new performance techniques. And all of this would be in keeping with how Beckett's own plays present theater as an institution that can challenge socially ingrained assumptions even as it proves beholden to their terms.

## CONCLUSION

In a 1967 letter to Sighle Kennedy, Beckett implied that those studying his work would find themselves in the “unenviable” position of having to explain or expand upon a set of writings premised on principles that are paradoxical or resistant to further development, principles such as “the ‘Naught is more real...’ and the ‘Ubi nihil vales...’” (*D*, 113).<sup>208</sup> It seems to me that contemporary interpreters of Beckett find themselves in particularly unenviable positions, although not exactly for the reason that Beckett imagined. As Beckett’s status and popularity continue to grow, they face increasing pressure to make their work speak to ever-growing readerships and audiences, which can mean bracketing the types of esoteric concerns that are sometimes taken for granted within Beckett studies. An editor or publisher who attempts to pitch one of Beckett’s novels will need to pinpoint, on some level, what makes it valuable. A scholar who attempts to write a coherent study for non-specialists might wish to adopt a theoretical framework reaching beyond references to Beckett’s favorite philosophers, to figures such as Democritus or Geulincx. Directors, actors, and technicians who stage a Beckett play for a general audience will likely aim to demonstrate how the play can speak to vital, ever-developing

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<sup>208</sup> Beckett refers to Democritus’s “Naught is more real than naught,” and to Arnold Geulincx’s “Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis” (Where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing).



theatrical traditions. Both the wish to remain faithful to current understandings of Beckett's intentions and the wish to speak to broadening audiences are premised on sound moral and ethical principles. Yet at its worst, the push-and-pull between these desires can feel like a push-and-pull between two unsavory options: I can simply trace a flow of words and images as faithfully as possible without any hope of further development or wider appeal, or I can render the work intelligible in a particular way at the risk of oversimplifying its ambiguities or neutralizing its most intriguing qualities.

A 2015 performance of *Happy Days* at the Young Vic Theatre in London exemplifies how these conflicting possibilities filter into current interpretations of Beckett's work—namely, in the form of an uneven mixture of both. In that production, the bell and the “blaze of hellish light” that awaken Winnie were clearly meant to emanate from no source identifiable within the context of the play (as the script dictates they should). They were sudden and intense and cut off as quickly as they began, offering a flash vision akin to an image out of a dream, frozen in time and memorable particularly for the mood evoked (in this case, one of startled agitation). Yet the performance also contained relatively realistic aspects not present within Beckett's script. Winnie seemed to have fallen from the cliff face jutting up behind her, and every time the bell rang, a small amount of dirt fell from a mound above her onto the mound in which she was partially buried.<sup>209</sup> Such hints at realistic explanations may be what encouraged critics to pick up on aspects of the production that could be made to speak to familiar concerns. Lyn Gardner wrote in the *Guardian* that Julianne Stevenson's Winnie was clearly “English and suburban,” which for Gardner highlighted that “[Winnie] is a woman with a history. We know her; we have all met her. She could be the woman who stares back at us from the mirror.”<sup>210</sup> Bella Todd, writing for

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<sup>209</sup> Natalie Abrahams, dir., *Happy Days* by Samuel Beckett (performance, Young Vic Theatre, London, 13 February 2015).

<sup>210</sup> Gardner, “Julianne Stevenson Brings Chirpy Spirit to Beckett,” production review of *Happy Days*, Young Vic Theatre, London, dir. Natalie Abrahams, *Guardian*, 20 February 2015, <[theguardian.com/stage/2015/feb/20/happy-days-review-julianne-stevenson-young-vic-samuel-beckett](http://theguardian.com/stage/2015/feb/20/happy-days-review-julianne-stevenson-young-vic-samuel-beckett)>.

*Time Out*, described Stevenson's Winnie as "a woman trapped within a great hulking metaphor: for the human condition, the fortitude of her sex, the miserliness of marriage and [...] the basic misery of the bloody Great British beach holiday."<sup>211</sup> Charles Spencer, writing in the *Telegraph*, ultimately admired how Stevenson's Winnie seemed "very English, very middle class, [...] display[ing] a very British kind of fortitude."<sup>212</sup>

Reviews such as these leave me in two minds. Imbued as they are with essentialist conceptions of class, gender, and nationality, they at first suggest to me that contemporary interpretations of Beckett's works would do better to emphasize the strange or the unfamiliar aspects of his works, those that challenge, rather than edify, received ideas about what it means to belong to a particular group. Beckett may have preferred this sort of emphasis, at least judging by an anecdote according to which, upon being told that the German version of his *Play* employs a non-idiomatic locution, he responds, "The unusual does not bother me at all."<sup>213</sup> His tolerance of linguistic oddity seems related to a desire to encourage an encounter with foreignness, with that which lies outside the habits, presumptions, and group identities that have come to circumscribe the person "who stares back at us from the mirror." At the same time, however, it strikes me that interpretations rooted in familiar resonances can be as important and valid as they are unavoidable, if only insofar as they tend to arise spontaneously and provide springboards to further reflection. These sorts of resonances, I imagine, are what many readers immediately sense in the "fail better" aphorism long before they have had a chance to excavate the paradoxical nuances of *Worstward Ho*. They are certainly what Billie Whitelaw claims to have sensed upon

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<sup>211</sup> Todd, production review of *Happy Days*, Young Vic Theatre, London, dir. Natalie Abrahami, *Time Out*, 20 February 2015, <[timeout.com/london/theatre/happy-days-1](http://timeout.com/london/theatre/happy-days-1)>.

<sup>212</sup> Spencer, production review of *Happy Days*, Young Vic Theatre, London, dir. Natalie Abrahami, *Telegraph*, 31 January 2014, <[telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/10607806/Happy-Days-Young-Vic.html](http://telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/10607806/Happy-Days-Young-Vic.html)>. Spencer's review is of the original 2014 production and not the revival staged a year later, but by all accounts differences between the two were minimal.

<sup>213</sup> Beckett quoted in Walter D. Asmus, "Beckett inszeniert sein *Spiel*: Probenstagebuch von Walter D. Asmus," *Theater heute* 19, no. 12 (December 1978), 6. My translation.

first reading *Not I*, in which she immediately “recognized the inner scream.”<sup>214</sup> That sort of recognition presumably comes before, and may even be what encourages, reflection on Mouth’s refusal to adopt the first person.

It is indeed a daunting task to find ways of reading and producing Beckett’s work that remain sensitive both to its elusive strangeness, which has the capacity to draw readers and audiences away from familiar experiences and ideologies, and to the sometimes all-too-familiar mental states it depicts, which for many readers and audiences deliver an eye-opening emotional jolt. The difficulty seems especially acute as the strangeness and the directness of his work become more and more familiar, making it less and less likely to startle either specialists or non-specialists out of their relative complacencies—out of, on the one hand, the tendency to privilege certain readings of a select handful of anecdotes in interpretation, and on the other hand, the tendency to look for all-encompassing metaphors that would reinforce preconceived ideas about the meaning (or meaninglessness) of existence. Derval Tubridy has recently written on innovative productions of Beckett’s plays that respond to such challenges with “a commitment to the contemporary” and “a careful negotiation between the call of the text and the response of people and place.”<sup>215</sup> Ultimately, she argues, such ongoing negotiations are necessary because interpretation for the stage always takes place under specific material circumstances: “The voice that comes to us from [the] dark is always an embodied voice” (140). The same is true of all forms of interpretation, not just interpretation for the stage. The acts of writing, reading, listening, and viewing are also always embodied—they always occur in specific places, under specific sets of historical and personal circumstances, and they too are shaped by the habits, responses, abilities, and constraints of individual bodies. The challenge posed by these shifting

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<sup>214</sup> Billie Whitelaw, interview for “A Wake for Sam,” BBC Two England, 7 February 1990. Available at <[youtube.com/watch?v=M4LDwfKxr-M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4LDwfKxr-M)>.

<sup>215</sup> Tubridy, “An Unforgettable Image: Staging Beckett’s Short Plays,” in *Staging Beckett in Great Britain*, ed. David Tucker and Trish McTighe (London: Methuen, 2016), 124.

variables calls for a continual openness to new, innovative, even transgressive modes of interpretation, modes conceived as continuances of, rather than deviations from or betrayals of, Beckett's own techniques. Beckett's work is certainly rooted in a number of specific ideas and debates that need further excavation and cataloging, but it can also remain an integral, active part of ongoing conversations within which—to adapt Beckett's phrase—the unusual does not bother us at all.

## ABBREVIATIONS

(All works by Samuel Beckett except *Exagmination*, by various authors)

- CDW* *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986.
- CP* *Samuel Beckett: Collected Poems*. Edited by Seán Lawlor and John Pilling. London: Faber and Faber, 2012.
- CSP* *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929–89*. Edited and with an introduction and notes by S. E. Gontarski. New York: Grove Press, 1995.
- D* *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Edited by Ruby Cohn. London: John Calder, 1983.
- DFMW* *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. Edited by Eoin O’Brien and Edith Fournier. Foreword by Eoin O’Brien. London: Calder Publications, 1993.
- El* *Eleutheria*. Translated by Barbara Wright. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- Ex* *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. London: Faber and Faber, 1929.
- LI* *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–1940*. Edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Dan Gunn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- LII* *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1941–56*. Edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Dan Gunn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- PTD* *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*. London: John Calder, 1965.
- T* *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. Translated by Patrick Bowles and Samuel Beckett. New York: Grove Press, 1955.

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