

BECKETT AND EUROPE: POESIS, LEGIBILITY, HISTORY

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Samuel Beckett's works are characterized by a pervasive sense of lateness—of having arrived after the peak of European civilization, with no choice but to work with outdated materials—that informs the works' challenging formal qualities and defines their historical consciousness with regard to the crisis of Europe in the twentieth century. The mutual and reciprocal articulation of this sense of lateness and the works' radical formal, aesthetic, and even technological experimentation yields an instance of what Edward W. Said has called "late style:" works characterized by an historical untimeliness that is expressed formally. Close readings of the prose fiction reveal a generative, essayistic literary practice that relentlessly assays habitual or conventional literary forms and consistently refuses closure or culmination as only another example of these conventions. This essayistic procedure and its gesture of refusal—the mark of Beckett's famous "fidelity to failure"—leave traces of the literary forms and conventions that the work has tried on and abandoned as obsolete. Within these traces, an image of Europe emerges—in the moment of its obsolescence—from the vestiges of forms of intelligibility that no longer communicate or have outlasted their use. "Europe," in this reading, does not stand outside the work as the "context" that renders the work legible to and available for interpretation; rather, it emerges vestigially and in retrospect, as the detritus that the essayistic process of testing and experimentation leaves behind as it searches for new forms of intelligibility that will inaugurate new beginnings. Beckett's career-long practice of self-translation contributes to this

essayistic process by staking out a critical position between languages from which to test the limits and possibilities of each, while his experimentation with new technologies and media in his dramatic works seeks non-literary, non-linguistic poetic means in the wake of literature's dominance as the bearer of culture.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION: ON BELATEDNESS AND BEGINNINGS

“The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.”

--Samuel Beckett, Murphy¹

1.1 “OFF WE GO AGAIN”

I would like to begin by commenting on how difficult it is to say something new about Samuel Beckett and his works, because so much has already been said, and so much of what has been said has been said so many times. But even that has been said before, and I cannot even acknowledge how late I have arrived at Beckett’s works (which, after all, are not that old) without falling into cliché, into a critical commonplace, even if I do so “otherwise than unawares.”² If, in 1965, “one of the keys to the whole phenomenon of Samuel Beckett, his *oeuvre*, and its impact” lay, as Martin Esslin suggested, in the impasse between the author’s notorious reticence to discuss the meaning of his works and “the critics’ massive urge to supply an explanation,”³ today’s readers of Beckett face the critical impasse of lateness, of having

¹ Samuel Beckett, Murphy (New York: Grove Press, 1957), 1.

² Samuel Beckett, Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, tr. by Samuel Beckett and Patrick Bowles (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 291.

³ Martin Esslin, “Introduction,” Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 1.

arrived after the fact, eager to contribute to a conversation that seemingly has already taken place. The unusually rapid proliferation of scholarship on Beckett's works following his nearly instantaneous rise to international fame with the success of Waiting for Godot created this impasse almost immediately, however: Esslin already noted, in 1965, that "no writer of our time has provoked a larger volume of critical comment, explanation, and exegesis in so short a time,"⁴ and his preface to the second edition of The Theatre of the Absurd—which recalls a 1964 London revival of Godot that yielded the general verdict that the play was a "modern classic," though "its meaning and symbolism were a little too obvious"—marvels at how quickly "the incomprehensible avant-garde work turns into the all too easily understood modern classic."⁵ From this point on, the critic—whose work always occurs after the fact, in a sense—is too late: the work has already been domesticated, assimilated into the ranks of the "classics" and the critical categories reserved for them, and rendered innocuous. Having arrived too late, then, with so much having already been said, how and where can criticism begin?

I pose this question not to speculate on what the considerable and imposing body of extant scholarship on Beckett might not yet have said, but rather to note how strongly the impasse that has quickly come to define the whole endeavor of reading and writing about Samuel Beckett resonates with the attitude that pervades and characterizes his works. "Off we go again," Vladimir says—repeating word for word Estragon's lament from the previous act, the previous iteration—as the Boy arrives to inform the two tramps, yet again, that Mr. Godot will not come that day, but surely the next, condemning them to wait, yet again, through another day, another iteration without progress or culmination.⁶ Vladimir's weariness at this prospect, his feeling that

⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁵ Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Overlook Press, 1973), ix.

⁶ Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, tr. by Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 105.

they've done and said all of this before, evinces a sense of lateness whose significance extends beyond his concern that he and Gogo may have missed their appointment. It expresses the historical consciousness that pervades Beckett's *oeuvre* and drives its procedure, and it indexes an historical problematic in the face of which Vladimir can only articulate, repeatedly, yet again, the note of general resignation with which the play begins: "Nothing to be done."⁷

But the play does begin and go on, even if it can only do so by acknowledging how exhausted and outdated are the materials with which it has to work. One of the first tacks that Vladimir tries in his vain effort to divert himself, Estragon, and the audience for a few hours is the story of the two thieves crucified alongside Christ, one of whom was saved, the other damned. "It's a reasonable percentage,"⁸ Didi muses evenhandedly, and the London audience smirks knowingly to itself, amused by the vaudeville antics playing out before it and feeling a little self-satisfied that it has figured out the play's "meaning and symbolism" so quickly: Didi and Gogo are the two thieves. Their lives are suspended between salvation and damnation, heaven and hell, and their fate lies in the hands of the mysterious Mr. Godot, whose very existence, let alone imminent arrival, remains doubtful. A "modern classic" indeed—a theological-philosophical drama whose dark irony expresses the skepticism of nihilistic times—even if it is "a little too obvious." But Didi resists the identification—if it even occurs to him—with the thieves, as his concern lies elsewhere, in the fact that, of the four Gospel accounts of Christ's crucifixion, only Luke's mentions that one of the thieves was saved; and yet, this dissenting, minority version of ostensibly the most important event in history seems to be the only version that anyone knows. "People are bloody ignorant apes," Gogo concludes

⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸ Ibid., 5.

dismissively, and the two move on to other diversions.⁹ But the theological reading has thereby been withdrawn: in the very moment that the play offers the familiar scene of the crucifixion to the audience as an interpretive clue and possibility, it undercuts that scene's explanatory power by interrogating how and why it has become the canonical, cultural common sense version of events. The play's interest in the scene of Christ's crucifixion lies not in questions of theological import, but in why the story has been passed down and received in a particular way and how, consequently, the story that everyone knows has lost its virtue, its interpretive value, its use. As a device whose deployment will make their situation comprehensible, even meaningful, the story has passed from viability into obsolescence; Didi and Gogo have arrived too late in the history of Western culture for that story to be of any use any more, so they must discard it and begin again another way.

This coarticulation of lateness and beginnings not only informs the play's back-and-forth, trial and error procedure, it evinces the consciousness of a moment of historical transition: the old stories, the received conventions have outlasted their value and cannot be used any longer, so something new must be made, another *way* of meaning adequate to changed circumstances must be cultivated. As Edward W. Said writes, "Beginnings inaugurate a deliberately *other* production of meaning,"¹⁰ one that distinguishes itself from the means of production already extant; and, indeed, among the most notable characteristics of Beckett's experimental and notoriously difficult literary endeavor is its tendency to disrupt, disable, and dismantle the received conventions and forms for producing literary meaning. This oppositional stance that Beckett's works adopt towards literary forms and conventions on the verge of obsolescence

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Edward W. Said, Beginnings: Intention and Method (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985): 13, emphasis in the original.

marks the characteristic attitude of what Said, following Adorno, has called “late style:” works that evince “a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*,”¹¹ an untimeliness that the works express formally. I will show in this study that Beckett’s destructive aesthetics exhibit precisely this “unproductive productiveness,” as their assault on the received forms and conventions of literature evinces an historical consciousness of transition and displays this at the level of form. By attending to the specificities of Beckett’s experimental form, then, we will elaborate an image of this historical consciousness defined by the coarticulation of belatedness and beginnings.

1.2 “A NEW CONCEPTION” OF LITERATURE AND HISTORY

Determining how to read Beckett’s *oeuvre* historically has long proven problematic, however, as the adversarial attitude that it takes towards the Western canon includes a refusal of the conventional signs and markers that would situate it within literary history. This remains a pressing concern for current criticism on Beckett, which struggles to situate a body of work that seems bent on achieving abstraction—as it deliberately eschews historical, geographical, and sociological specificity whenever possible—within a context that will make it available for historical analysis.

Jorge Luis Borges’ remarkable fiction, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” offers another way to conceive of this problem. In this fiction, Borges imagines a second, identical Don Quixote written in the twentieth century, and he compares this later version side-by-side

¹¹ Edward W. Said, On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain (New York: Vintage, 2007), 7.

with the seventeenth century original. In doing so, he not only demonstrates the ways that literary interpretation depends as much upon historical perspective and judgment as upon the semantic meaning of words, he even goes so far as to reconceive the *mode* of relation between literature and history:

Menard's fragmentary Quixote is more subtle than Cervantes'. The latter, in a clumsy fashion, opposes to the fictions of chivalry the tawdry provincial reality of his country; Menard selects as his "reality" the land of Carmen during the century of Lepanto and Lope de Vega. What a series of *espagnolades* that selection would have suggested to Maurice Barrès or Dr. Rodríguez Larreta! Menard eludes them with complete naturalness. In his work there are no gypsy flourishes or conquistadors or mystics or Philip the Seconds or *autos da fé*. He neglects or eliminates local color. This disdain points to a new conception of the historical novel. This disdain condemns Salammbô, with no possibility of appeal.¹²

That Menard *composes* his Quixote in a different world (twentieth century France) from Cervantes' seventeenth century Spain is clear enough already. Indeed, among the most significant differences between these worlds is the fact that, in Menard's world, Cervantes' Quixote already exists: "It is not in vain that three hundred years have gone by, filled with exceedingly complex events. Amongst them, to mention only one, is the Quixote itself."¹³ But, what is more, the two novels are *set* in different worlds, worlds that differ in kind: while Cervantes' novel is set in the world that he saw when he looked out his window ("the tawdry provincial reality of his country"), Menard's novel is set in a world that no longer exists except

¹² Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," Labyrinths, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. by James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

in literature, “the land of Carmen during the century of Lepanto and Lope de Vega.” We might even say that, while Cervantes set his Quixote in the seventeenth century Spain in which he himself lived, Menard set his Quixote within the literary world created by Cervantes’ work. Whether Cervantes meant to create a world, as opposed to merely reflecting the one that already existed, is of little importance here; through his novel, its fame, and its consequent historical legacy, that world has entered into the literary tradition and continues to survive there as a literary figure, regardless of Cervantes’ intentions; in this way, “Fame is a form of incomprehension,”¹⁴ as Menard says. But in drawing upon that figure in a later moment, in using it as the setting for a novel in the twentieth century, Menard reveals that setting, that world, *as* a figure from the tradition, rather than as a physical place that one could actually visit.

Of paramount importance to Borges is that Menard evokes this world without recourse to the “*espagnolades*,” the “gypsy flourishes or conquistadors or mystics or Philip the Seconds or *autos da fé*” that would establish the setting through “local color,” a set of distinctive external markers—landmarks, buildings, customs, rituals—that might be used to contextualize and locate the work in a particular place in the world and in history. This refusal of—even “disdain” for—local color “points to a new conception of the historical novel” and a new way of understanding the relation between the work and history. Menard does not situate his work *within* history by “contextualizing” it amid the markers of “local color,” because history, for Menard (and for Borges), is not a *place* in the past. It is, rather, concrete figures of thought and language that exist and change in the present.

Borges’ “new conception of the historical novel” and, more generally, of the relation between literature and history offers a way to begin thinking about the equally labyrinthine

¹⁴ Ibid., 43.

historical problem raised by Beckett's *oeuvre*. Few critics of his works have failed to note the sparseness of their settings and their relative lack of historical context and detail. In fact, we can discern a progressive diminution of recognizable settings and contexts throughout Beckett's *oeuvre*. Early stories—such as “Ding-Dong,” which finds Belacqua walking around Dublin for the sake of wandering and taking in his surroundings—abound in passages like the following:

Belacqua made off at all speed in the opposite direction. Down Pearse Street, that is to say, long straight Pearse Street, its vast Barrack of Glencullen granite, its home of tragedy restored and enlarged, its coal merchants and Florentine Fire Brigade Station, its two Cervi saloons, ice-cream and fried fish, its dairies, garages and monumental sculptors, and implicit behind the whole length of its southern frontage the College. *Perpetuis futuris temporibus duraturum.*¹⁵

The detailed names provide a precise geographical location; the College that lies “implicit behind the whole length of [the street's] southern frontage” makes that location fully three-dimensional in space and indicates that the scene described is part of a larger world than can be taken in by the solitary observer. The “two Cervi saloons, ice cream and fried fish” suggest the dietary habits of a particular people, while the “home of tragedy restored and enlarged” hints at their common history. The College's Latin motto, “*Perpetuis futuris temporibus duraturum,*” looks towards that people's future while simultaneously expressing a specific religious and intellectual formation. The passage's minute physical descriptions, wordplay, and unexpected conjunctions of incongruous items (“garages and monumental sculptors”)—to say nothing of the walk itself as a device and motif—bear the immediate mark of James Joyce's influence and, thus, situate the story within a specific literary lineage. In short, we can discern in this passage

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, “Ding-Dong,” *More Pricks than Kicks* (New York: Grove Press, 1972), 40.

all of the elements that Borges' narrator disdainfully calls "local color:" the specific language, locales, history, and cultural tradition of a particular nation or people.

Almost thirty years later, having passed from the comparatively vibrant Dublin of More Pricks than Kicks through Molloy's and Godot's desolate country roads, to the austere single rooms of Endgame and Malone Dies, and through the intangible darkness of The Unnamable, we find the following passage:

No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine. Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit. Till all white in the whiteness the rotunda. No way in, go in, measure. Diameter three feet, three feet from ground to summit of the vault...The light that makes all so white no visible source, all shines with the same white shine, ground, wall, vault, bodies, no shadow.¹⁶

The passage provides a detailed description of a scene, but this description is purely abstract, characterized only by measurement; the rotunda could be anywhere or nowhere. The light that shines on the scene from no visible source and whose uniform radiance produces no shadows eliminates any sense of spatial depth by destroying the chiaroscuro effect that allows perception to distinguish figure from ground. The text alternates between second- and third-person voices and between indicative and imperative moods, often in a way that makes one cancel out the other: the third-person indicative phrase, "Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly," seems to describe a setting, albeit an elusive one, until the second-person imperative, "omit," strikes it from the text and makes it appear as a narrative device that has been provisionally adopted and then summarily discarded. Similarly, the conflict between the third-

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, Imagination Dead Imagine, The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989, ed. by S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 182.

person indicative, “No way in,” and the second-person imperative, “go in, measure,” can neither describe nor command an actual corporeal entity to perform the impossible operation of measurement whose results nonetheless follow immediately. The passage depicts bodies but enumerates them together with other objects—“ground, wall, vault, bodies, no shadow”—without subordinating those objects to the bodies’ use or contemplation. Nothing indicates a history, a process of human making, or even the passage of time, except the vague affirmation, “imagination not dead yet,” which specifies neither a location nor an agent of this imagining. We have, then, one of the most extreme examples in the Beckettian *oeuvre* of the eradication of “local color” and historical context: “No trace anywhere of life.” There seems to be nothing in this passage that expresses the historical conditions of a particular nation, people, or any other social aggregate.

The earliest studies of Beckett typically read this lack of historical and sociological specificity in his works as an indication of either his formalism or his intellectual debt to existentialism.¹⁷ Edith Kern’s “Drama Stripped for Inaction: Beckett’s Godot,” the first academic essay on Beckett in English, for example, argues that the play represents the absurd fate of humanity in a fallen world devoid of God or meaning. Kern distinguishes Beckett’s supposed existentialism from the Sartrean and Heideggerian existentialisms, though, as she claims that “Beckett’s characters are never ‘*en situation*.’ They are, rather, entirely removed from the more immediate problems of society...The characters of Waiting for Godot are certainly never ‘*engagés*,’ or committed.”¹⁸ Didi and Gogo lack “all psychological and

¹⁷ There are important exceptions to this trend, such as Georges Bataille’s 1951 essay, “Le Silence de Molloy.” My intention here, though, is to draw out the major critical trends that have gained and maintained prevalence.

¹⁸ Edith Kern, “Drama Stripped for Inaction: Beckett’s Godot,” Yale French Studies 14 (Winter, 1954-55): 47.

sociological detail,”¹⁹ and thus, Kern argues, “they represent all mankind” and its plight.²⁰ Without concrete sociological data, without a specific *situation*, setting, or context, and without a definite socio-political commitment, Didi and Gogo represent no one in particular, which, according to Kern, means that they represent humanity universally. In the absence of certain recognizable markers that indicate a specific place and time, Kern suggests, Beckett’s work ascends to the abstract level of “dramatized philosophy”²¹ that gazes indifferently, if at all, upon the “immediate problems of society.”

More recent critics have chafed at the image of Beckett as the solitary, philosophical artist indifferent to history, and they have tried to rectify this by uncovering or producing contexts that situate Beckett and his works historically.²² This has proven difficult, however, especially for models of literary history grounded in the idea of national literatures: for a middle-class Irishman of Protestant stock who wrote in both English and French while living in Paris—having moved there initially to teach Italian—locating the correct national context is no simple matter, and any context is bound to be too restrictive. Taking the broader view and calling Beckett a “European” has proven just as problematic, as this view has often been associated with the universalist, philosophical reading of Beckett that is widely considered today to be insufficiently historical. Hugh Kenner’s landmark works on Beckett from the ‘60s, for example, read his *oeuvre* as representing the epitome of the Enlightenment Stoicism that has evacuated the

¹⁹ Ibid., 44.

²⁰ Ibid., 43. This interpretation is so prevalent that further citation is unnecessary. It has become the common sense reading of Beckett, by which I mean that one is just as likely to find it in an academic journal as in the playbill at the theater.

²¹ Ibid., 45.

²² See, for example, Lois Oppenheim, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). This anthology, as a whole, represents the new wave of critics who read Beckett in relation to nearly every major contemporary critical paradigm or methodology, e.g., postcolonial studies, queer studies, feminism, psychoanalytic theory, poststructuralism, textual and bibliographical criticism, and so on. One of the main goals of such work is to produce what David Pattie calls, in his contribution to the volume (“Beckett and Bibliography”), “historically contextualized analyses” (244).

European tradition of its humanistic spirit and brought about the apocalypse of Western culture; Kenner thus treats Beckett's works as addressing specifically European themes and problems, but his argument is as much philosophical as it is literary, and certainly more than it is historicist. Eoin O'Brien's The Beckett Country (1986) and John Harrington's The Irish Beckett (1991) formed the opposing pole of the question concerning how to think historically about Beckett, as their works situate him more concretely and empirically amid the landscape (O'Brien) and socio-political climate (Harrington) of Ireland. Harrington articulates the problem particularly clearly, as he sets the elucidation of Beckett's material, "Irish contexts" in direct opposition to the prevailing critical tendency towards "Platonizing him out of existence."²³ The resulting dichotomy not only pits Ireland and Europe against each other as competing contexts within which to read Beckett's works, it implicitly links each context to its own mode of reading and interpretation: reading Beckett in the Irish context means attending to the material specificities of history, while reading him as a European entails abstract philosophizing. Dirk Van Hulle's recent special issue of the Journal of Beckett Studies, titled Beckett the European, addresses this latter aspect of the dichotomy, as it seeks to recover Europe as a viable *historical* and *empirical* context for Beckett studies by excavating Beckett's writing process—as represented in his notebooks, manuscript drafts, and other archival material—in order to unearth the "direct traces of European culture"²⁴ that lie latent beneath the surface of the finished works. By uncovering these traces of Europe within the material record of the works' composition, rather than in lofty, philosophical abstractions, Van Hulle et al. shift the grounds of the Ireland/Europe dichotomy and set the two poles on a more equal footing.

²³ John P. Harrington, The Irish Beckett (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 4.

²⁴ Dirk Van Hulle, "Genetic Beckett Studies," Journal of Beckett Studies 13.2 (2005), 8.

Most recently, Seán Kennedy's collection, Beckett and Ireland, seeks to complicate or even dissolve the "Irish Beckett - Beckett the European" binary in order to investigate more nuanced interactions between these two seemingly opposed contexts; though, Kennedy's recommendation that we think of Beckett as "an *Irish writer* with a strong interest in European culture"²⁵ continues to beg the question, while Michael Wood's contribution reinforces the old dichotomy by suggesting that writing about Beckett outside the context of Ireland constitutes "a betrayal of our debt to history."²⁶ Such betrayals represent, for Kennedy,

the dominant account of Beckett's development, in which, as Anna McMullan puts it, "all specificities of class, nation, or geography...give way to abstract and formalized spaces of representation."...We are approaching here the common sense that Beckett's art is a rarefied aesthetic exercise, "a sort of ornamentation, finally."²⁷

The effort to uncover "a stabilized frame of Irish reference"²⁸—which, Kennedy concedes, can never be fully realized—comprised of place-names and other distinctive markers, is grounded in the more fundamental desire to provide any kind of historical context at all for the works, lest they ascend to the heights of what Kern called "dramatized philosophy." What is clear, however, is that all of these critics share a common premise: that literature's historicity may be characterized by its situation within a set of markers that contextualize it, and that the apparent lack of such contexts in Beckett's works presents a unique problem for literary and historical criticism. The earlier wave of critics from the '50s and '60s read the lack of geographical and

²⁵ Seán Kennedy, "Ireland/Europe...Beckett/Beckett," Beckett and Ireland, ed. by Seán Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8, emphasis added.

²⁶ Michael Wood, "Vestiges of Ireland in Beckett's Late Fiction," Beckett and Ireland, 171.

²⁷ Kennedy, 10-11.

²⁸ Kennedy, 12.

sociological detail in Beckett's works as a departure from historical realism and an indication of the philosophical and universal bent of Beckett's thought, while the newer wave endeavors to provide Beckett with concrete historical contexts and political commitments in order to rescue him from charges of political quietism and bourgeois aesthetic elitism. Relying on the idea of historical context or situatedness seems a bit suspect, however, when referring to a writer who so openly disparages, in the "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," the relation between artist and occasion, and who so painstakingly effaces the markers of context or situation from his works.

Even in the austere and barren passage from Imagination Dead Imagine quoted above, though, we can recognize certain literary elements that index the historicity of the text in different ways: the familiar device of setting proposed and then discarded, the chiaroscuro technique evoked by its absence, the alternating prosaic voices and moods that fail to articulate a subject either of narration or of action. Imagination Dead Imagine may not depict an event or human agents, but it nonetheless presents certain devices and motifs that are constitutive of a specific literary tradition, and it adopts a particular position and attitude towards that tradition in the process.

A clearer example may be found in the mid-'40s story, "The Calmative." Here, the narrator, who speaks seemingly from the grave, though he doesn't know when he died, tells himself stories to calm himself, to distract himself from "the great red lapses of the heart, the tearings at the caecal walls,"²⁹ the sounds of his decay. The story that he tells, which features himself as its protagonist, begins in a grove, then progresses to a dark wood, which in its turn gives way to the gate of a city whose bright lights torment him and obscure the constellations in

²⁹ Samuel Beckett, "The Calmative," Stories and Texts For Nothing (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 27.

the sky, thus prohibiting him from orienting himself and escaping the city by the same gate through which he entered, which lies to his west. The story offers no specific place-names or other concrete markers that locate it precisely in the world, and it occurs, as it were, inside the narrator's skull, part of an internal monologue enclosed within the "frame" narrative of the narrator's continuing life and consciousness after death. This does not mean, however, that the story ascends to "dramatized philosophy" or that it lacks historical perspective. The trees in the grove "were the perishing oaks immortalized by d'Aubigné;"³⁰ note that they are not "like" those trees. The dark wood leading to the gate of the city recalls "the wood that darkens the mouth of hell, do you remember, I only just;"³¹ here, the narrator not only alludes to Dante's Inferno, but he even pauses to ensure that the reader recognizes the allusion as well. The infernal city's bright lights prevent the narrator from escaping by returning the way he came in, which also happens to be west; the story thus presents two common conventions of narrative closure—bringing the journey full circle back to its starting point (a motif as old as The Odyssey), and the death of the protagonist (figured by the journey west)—but it immediately disables them as outdated clichés destined for obsolescence. Although "The Calmative" lacks the markers of local color, the indices of its historicity may nonetheless be found, as in Menard's Quixote, in its engagement with familiar literary figures, devices, and motifs, and its reflection on them *as* figures, devices, and motifs that constitute the history of literature and its continued life in the present. Through them, a vestigial image of Europe emerges, not as a "context" that historicizes the works from the outside, but as figures of thought and language, as forms of intelligibility that no longer communicate or have outlasted their use. In this way, Beckett's works, to paraphrase Borges, point to a new conception of the historicity of literature.

³⁰ Ibid., 28.

³¹ Ibid., 33.

Elaborating this conception forms the burden of this study, which seeks to address the formal particularities of Beckett's *oeuvre* historically and treat the *oeuvre*'s defining historical consciousness as a question of literary form. The first two chapters complement and supplement each other, in this regard: while the first engages Beckett's *oeuvre* at the level of form and reads the works' notoriously challenging and open-ended form as an expression of the historical perspective of lateness that eschews the received conventions of the literary tradition as outdated, the second chapter focuses on the historical image of Europe and its literary tradition that emerges vestigially from amid the detritus and traces left behind by Beckett's deliberately unfinished, abandoned works. Together, these chapters seek to synthesize an analysis of Beckett's formal experimentation with a reading of the historical consciousness of the European literary tradition that the works exhibit at the level of form, thereby providing an *immanent* reading of the *oeuvre* that attends to both the formal and the historical, but does so without recourse to the notion of historical "context," or (more precisely) history *as* context. Accordingly, each chapter addresses, along the way, one of the two poles of the Beckett-*l'abstracteur*/historically-contextualized-Beckett dichotomy described above. The first chapter, in elaborating the historical attitude and literary *ethos* exhibited by the works' open-ended, essayistic form, refutes the reading (advanced powerfully in Hugh Kenner's 1960s studies and picked up again recently, in a different vein, by Pascale Casanova) of Beckett as a Cartesian Stoic whose works attain a formal closure and self-sufficiency that set it outside of history, as the epitome of the destruction of the humanistic tradition that either signals a cultural apocalypse (Kenner) or finally ushers literature into modernity (Casanova); the chapter demonstrates instead the open-ended process of testing that leaves behind traces of the forms of intelligibility that it cannot destroy entirely. The second chapter, in reading the image of Europe that emerges

vestigially and retrospectively in these traces, refutes the mode of reading that treats Europe as a stable “context” that historicizes the *oeuvre* from the outside, insisting instead upon a vestigial image of Europe that emerges immanently within the works, as outdated modes of intelligibility that once grounded the literary tradition and its public. In this way, these chapters not only investigate the historicity of the *oeuvre*, but they scrutinize the mode of relation by which this historicity is defined.

Having established the formal-historical problematic of Beckett’s literary endeavor as a question of forms of intelligibility, the third and fourth chapters investigate two of the more significant means by which Beckett assayed these forms in the effort to produce new forms of intelligibility that would ground a new public. The third chapter reads Beckett’s career-long practice of self-translation—of writing in two separate languages and translating between them—as establishing a position *between* languages from which he assays the historical possibilities inherent in each. This means treating translation not as a mere vehicle that transmits content across linguistic contexts and, thus, enlarges the works’ readership by increasing access to it; rather, it means investigating the part that translation plays in disengaging language from nation on the way to an international language and an international public, or a literature after the idea of national languages and literatures.

The fourth chapter turns toward the dramatic works and scrutinizes especially the “media” plays: Beckett’s works for radio, film, and television. Beckett’s experimentation with these new technologies and media, I argue, leads him away from the question of language and literature altogether, as here, he finds the possibilities of cultivating a cultured public in the wake of literature’s demise as the bearer of the tradition, a public whose consciousness is grounded in forms of intelligibility defined by technology rather than language, by film rather than by

literature. Here, despite Beckett's frequent and famous claims that he thought of his dramatic works as a mere respite from the more serious work of the prose, we find his most radical experimentation with and destruction of literary forms as a way of engaging the historical problematics that occupy the entire *oeuvre* and elaborating new forms of intelligibility for a post-literary culture.

2.0 ASSAYING THE HYPOTHETICAL: THE *ETHOS* OF THE ABANDONED WORK

“So, I may happen to contradict myself but, as Demades said, I never contradict truth. If my soul could only find a footing I would not be assaying myself but resolving myself. But my soul is ever in its apprenticeship and being tested.”

--Michel de Montaigne, “On Repenting”³²

“Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares?”

--Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable³³

2.1 BECKETT’S “WÖRTERSTÜRMEREI”

In a 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, written in German, Beckett famously announces his intention to produce what he calls a “literature of the unword.”³⁴

³² Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays, ed. and trans. by M.A. Screech (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 908.

³³ Samuel Beckett, Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, tr. by Samuel Beckett and Patrick Bowles (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 291.

³⁴ Samuel Beckett, “German Letter of 1937,” Disjecta, ed. by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 173. Here and in what follows, I quote Martin Esslin’s translation of the letter, which appears in the Disjecta collection, even though a new translation by Viola Westbrook has recently been published in the first volume of The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). The two translations differ, sometimes significantly, and I will stress one of these differences presently; in the meantime, I quote from Esslin’s translation, as this one will be more familiar to scholars. Esslin’s rendering of “Literatur des Unworts” as “literature of the unword,” especially, has become canonical in the study of Beckett.

And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today [...] Let us therefore act like that mad mathematician who used a different principle of measurement at each step of his calculation. An assault against words in the name of beauty.”³⁵

Ruby Cohn’s Foreword to Disjecta, the volume in which Martin Esslin’s English translation of this letter was first published, claims that the letter “reveals more of [Beckett’s] artistic credo than any other document.”³⁶ C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski corroborate this judgment, stating that the letter “offers invaluable insights into SB’s growing alienation from public opinion” and his development of certain guiding “intuitions” regarding language.³⁷ James Knowlson’s authorized biography of Beckett, Damned to Fame, asserts the significance of Beckett’s German travels in 1936-37, during which he met Kaun, as Knowlson exploits the posthumous discovery of diaries from that period and makes these diaries central to his portrait of the developing

³⁵ Ibid., 171-173.

³⁶ Ibid., 11. Cohn’s Note at the end of the volume (pg. 170), immediately preceding Esslin’s translation, repeats that, in this letter, “Beckett articulated a virtual credo.”

³⁷ C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski, The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 221. The Grove Companion acts as a reference work, an encyclopedia of Samuel Beckett and his works. Its unambiguous and matter-of-fact judgment of the “German letter’s” value, then, indicates both the canonical status that the letter has attained in the study of Beckett and the prevalence of this particular judgment of its value.

artist.³⁸ Klaus Albrecht—younger brother of Günther Albrecht, who was an acquaintance of Beckett’s in Hamburg during this time, as well as Axel Kaun’s best friend—also presents Beckett’s time in Germany as a formative period that led directly to his return to Paris and the commencement, in earnest, of his literary career.³⁹ Within this context, the 1937 letter to Kaun has been read almost as a manifesto announcing the new aesthetic direction that would shape Beckett’s literary output for decades to come. Indeed, this letter finally distinguishes what we can recognize as the beginnings of a Beckettian aesthetic—a “literature of the unword”—from the Joycean aesthetic—an “apotheosis of the word”⁴⁰—that Beckett struggled to distance himself from.⁴¹

Reading the letter as the aesthetic manifesto or credo of the developing artist, one cannot help but notice the violent and disdainful tone that characterizes the document: language must be “torn apart;” the writer must “bore one hole after another in it;” the end goal, a “literature of the unword,” may be attained only by an “assault against words.” The conventions of literature appear here as a set of outdated habits and tired clichés whose historical relevance has long since past. And not just the prevailing conventions of literature at the moment: the constitutive elements of literature *per se*—down to and including even “Grammar and Style”—“have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman.” There can be no “higher goal for a writer today” than to destroy, discard, or otherwise circumvent these elements, Beckett says, and he thus articulates a kind of aesthetic negativity that responds to the

³⁸ James Knowlson, Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1996). Knowlson discusses the discovery and significance of the diaries in his Preface (pp. 19-22), and the diaries constitute the major source material for Chapter 10, “Germany: The Unknown Diaries, 1936-37” (pp. 216-242).

³⁹ Klaus Albrecht, “Günther Albrecht—Samuel Beckett—Axel Kaun,” Journal of Beckett Studies 13.2 (Spring 2004): 24-38.

⁴⁰ Beckett, Disjecta, 172.

⁴¹ Evidence of this struggle is ample, especially in his correspondence. See, for example, his 28 June 1932 letter to Samuel Putnam: “But I vow I will get over J.J. ere I die.” The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940, 108.

sense of “lateness”—of living after the characteristic conventions and forms of European culture and literature have fallen into obsolescence—that pervades the letter. This historical perspective, the recognition that the “writer today” has arrived too late to fruitfully and creatively employ the materials that have constituted the European literary tradition, drives the aesthetic goal of an “assault against words” in the name of clearing away the ruins of the tradition and allowing new forms of creativity to emerge. The publication of this letter in 1984 must have appeared to confirm what several decades of critics had been saying all along about Beckett’s works: that they disintegrate literary form and content, destroying conventional literary devices and rendering them unusable, “assault[ing],” indeed, the very edifice of language and literature as an institution.⁴² Such critics have emphasized the negative, destructive aspects of Beckett’s literary aesthetic, and the publication of the letter to Kaun has only consecrated that reading.

The word that Esslin translates as “[an] assault against words” bears further scrutiny, however, and stressing it will reveal another aspect of the burgeoning Beckettian aesthetic. Beckett’s German sentence reads, “Eine Wörterstürmerei im Namen der Schönheit.”⁴³ Esslin’s “assault against words” adequately renders the sense of “Eine Wörterstürmerei,” or a “storming” of words, but it glosses over the strangeness of Beckett’s formulation, as well as its invention: the word appears in neither the Duden nor the Deutsches Wörterbuch der Grimm. Viola Westbrook, the translator of Beckett’s German letters in the recently published Letters of Samuel Beckett, translates “Eine Wörterstürmerei” more literally as “Word-storming.”⁴⁴ Doing so retains the peculiarity of Beckett’s formulation, both in the sense of its “strangeness” and in the sense that it is “peculiar to” the German language and its conventions. Beckett only began to

⁴² See Raymond Federman, Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett’s Early Fiction (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1965) as an influential example of this critical commonplace.

⁴³ Beckett, Disjecta, 54.

⁴⁴ Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940, 520.

study German as an adult and, thus, had attained neither the facility nor the familiarity with the language that he had with French. Westbrook argues, in the “German Translator’s Preface” to the Letters, that Beckett’s German letters from the 1930s read like those of a student still learning the language, approaching it as an outsider, thinking in English and contorting those thoughts to fit into the German.⁴⁵ This process often results in overt mistakes—Beckett frequently uses “syntax that is possible in English but not in German”⁴⁶—but it also affords him the opportunity to experiment with a language that he is just discovering, to probe the possibilities presented by its conventions, which he had not yet mastered and rendered habitual for himself.⁴⁷ Such experimentation in “student” texts, Westbrook claims, often yields “creative wordplay, word inventions, and unusual word combinations,”⁴⁸ especially in German, which permits the creation of compound words that have no English equivalent. Such inventions, of which “Eine Wörterstürmerei” is only one, pervade the German letters, and they exhibit a mind that is not merely struggling with an unfamiliar language, but deliberately pushing against its conventions to see what they will yield. Westbrook’s literal rendering of Beckett’s neologism illuminates for the English-speaking reader the laborious process of testing and invention that Esslin’s translation hides by assimilating it into quotidian terms. Westbrook’s translation reveals that the phrase with which Beckett launches his offensive against language, in its very

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, xliii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xliv.

⁴⁷ See also John Fletcher, Samuel Beckett’s Art (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), 96-100. Fletcher makes the same argument for Beckett’s French: “An author writing in a language not his own will tend to do certain things that a native will not tend to do, at least not habitually” (97); “one can detect that he is conscious of writing in a foreign tongue, and enjoys manipulating it” (98); “In his adopted medium, Beckett can rarely resist a play on words, and his pleasure in this might well be considered naïve by a native for whom habit has dulled their strangeness [...] Beckett is so ready to exploit a pun that he tends to see them in situations where a native would probably miss them” (99-100). The foreignness of the language grants Beckett a critical vantage point from outside of it, which allows him to experiment with it in ways that most native speakers would not or could not.

⁴⁸ Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940, xlv.

formulation, finds him experimenting with language, testing its possibilities and limits of expression, and inventing a new expression. The “assault” is, at the same time, an “assay.”

If we are to think of the letter to Axel Kaun as a significant document that evinces a burgeoning aesthetic, then we must consider the Beckettian “Wörterstürmerei” under both of its aspects: as “assault” and as “assay.” Examining this latter aspect will form the burden of the present chapter, which endeavors to describe the coarticulation in Beckett’s works of a radically experimental literary aesthetic with a corresponding literary *ethos*—more precisely, to describe the aesthetic *as ethos*—grounded in the historical perspective of lateness that surveys the extant literary materials and finds them already in decline, having outlived their viability, and verging on obsolescence. The task of outlining the Beckettian aesthetic has been undertaken before, of course, but previous attempts have typically tried to synthesize, from Beckett’s diverse and occasional critical writings, a coherent aesthetic theory or philosophical foundation upon which Beckett built his *oeuvre*.⁴⁹ Likewise, many critics have pursued questions of ethics in relation to this *oeuvre*—Russell Smith goes so far as to claim that “the ethical reading has been a dominant mode in the reception of Beckett”⁵⁰—especially since the so-called “ethical turn” in literary criticism, but these too have adopted a predominantly theoretical approach that tries to decipher Beckett’s ethical philosophy as it is enacted by the characters in his works. By contrast, this chapter will describe an essayistic literary practice and *ethos* whose works emerge not as functions of a coherent aesthetic philosophy but as the results of a committed adherence to an open-ended and self-critically vigilant process of testing: the “Wörterstürmerei.” We will find,

⁴⁹ James Acheson, Samuel Beckett’s Artistic Theory and Practice (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997) and Martin Esslin’s introductory piece to the seminal anthology, Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), stand as notable examples here.

⁵⁰ Russell Smith, “Introduction,” Beckett and Ethics, ed. by Russell Smith (London: Continuum, 2008), 4. For other prominent works on Beckett’s ethics, see John Calder, The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett (London: Calder, 2001) and Shane Weller, Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

later on, that this process leaves a residue, a sediment, lingering traces of the literary history that it seeks to destroy. Attending to these traces in the chapters that follow will allow us to develop a way of investigating the historicity of the *oeuvre* without falling back on the conception of history as “context.”

The Texts for Nothing will provide a fruitful point of departure, as its form—an open-ended series of thirteen texts that never reaches resolution—will be most conducive to exploring the essayistic aspect of the Beckettian “Wörterstürmerei.” I will turn to some of the other prose fiction works—focusing especially on Watt and Company—later on. Opening the Texts at random, my eye falls upon the following passage:

But it will end, a desinence will come, or the breath fail better still, I’ll be silence,

I’ll know I’m silence, no, in the silence you can’t know, I’ll never know anything.

But at least get out of here, at least that, no? I don’t know.⁵¹

Here, the familiar Beckettian conflict between the desire for resolution or an ending and the impossibility of its achievement is primarily figured, as it so often is in Beckett, as a continuous stream of language vainly yearning for silence. To be sure, the passage also presents escape (“at least get out of here, at least that”) and death (“or the breath fail better still”) as alternative figures of resolution, but even this latter is posed in a way that also suggests losing the capacity to speak. This phrase’s position in the sentence—falling between an affirmation of a coming “desinence” or grammatical ending, on one side, and the declarative, “I’ll be silence, I’ll know I’m silence” on the other—emphasizes this connotation. The text immediately negates these affirmations of the coming silence and the end of speech—“no, in the silence you can’t know, I’ll never know anything”—and the yearning for silence continues, unresolved, its persistence

⁵¹ Samuel Beckett, Stories and Texts for Nothing (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 112.

evident in the passage's paratactic structure and evenly paced clauses, which give the sense of a continuous, measured, and repeated effort. Even the end of the Texts for Nothing, which holds out the promise of "a coda worthy of the rest" and "the end of the farce of making and the silencing of silence,"⁵² fails to resolve these efforts:

And were there one day to be here, where there are no days, which is no place,
born of the impossible voice the unmakeable being, and a gleam of light, still all
would be silent and empty and dark, as now, as soon now, when all will be ended,
all said, it says, it murmurs.⁵³

The last phrases, "it says, it murmurs," indicate that the preceding declarations of closure and finality—"as soon now, when all will be ended, all said"—are merely quotations, something someone else said, other voices speaking. The possibility of ending in this manner—achieving a final silence and darkness that puts thought and speech to rest at last—appears as only the latest iteration of a tired formula, an old spell whose charm has long since worn off, "the same old mutterings, the same old stories, the same old questions and answers."⁵⁴ Even at the end of his work, Beckett refuses to allow any such formula to gain a foothold and resolve the work, even though to do so would provide the comfort and satisfaction of a closed form, as in the story of Joe Breem, or Breen:

Yes, to the end, always muttering, to lull me and keep me company, and all ears
always, all ears for the old stories, as when my father took me on his knee and
read me the one about Joe Breem, or Breen, the son of a lighthouse keeper,
evening after evening, all the long winter through. [...] that's all I remember this

⁵² Ibid., 139.

⁵³ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 78.

evening, it ended happily, it began unhappily and it ended happily, every evening,
a comedy, for children.⁵⁵

Rather than allow the familiar narrative form to “lull [him] and keep [him] company,” Beckett remains vigilant, and at the last moment, he turns against his own ending and reveals it as a cliché for which he no longer has any use. The work remains unresolved and perpetually vexed, therefore, as a result of this attitude of vigilant testing that presents the desired, conventional conclusion but refuses to submit to its habitual comforts.

The Texts for Nothing, thus, proceed as a kind of trial whose open-endedness is a necessary consequence of its procedure:

I’m the clerk, I’m the scribe, at the hearings of what cause I know not. Why want
it to be mine, I don’t want it. There it goes again, that’s the first question this
evening. To be judge and party, witness and advocate, and he, attentive,
indifferent, who sits and notes.⁵⁶

Here, we have a trial both in the sense of a judicial proceeding and in the sense that the text is “trying on” a guise, a figure for thought, or a narrative trope that will reach some kind of resolution. In this case, the text conjures up a courtroom scene, an opportunity to weigh opposing arguments, take notes, and render a reasoned judgment that will bring the matter at hand to some kind of conclusion. Inevitably, this fails—“There it goes again, that’s the first question this evening”—as the trope or figure breaks down into the same endless stream of irresolvable questions, and the process continues, as the text searches for a new figure to try on. Throughout the Texts, in fact, we find a series of “trials” in this second sense, as each of the thirteen texts tries or assays a different approach in an effort to end:

⁵⁵ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 95.

If I said, There's a way out there, there's a way out somewhere, the rest would come. What am I waiting for then, to say it? To believe it? And what does that mean, the rest? Shall I answer, try and answer, or go on as though I had asked nothing?⁵⁷

The conditional, "If I said," that opens Text 9 indicates that what follows will be a provisional tactic, a hypothesis that allows thought to gain a footing, however tenuous, and begin to move toward some kind of resolution. The endless stream of questions emerges immediately to test that hypothesis—"What am I waiting for then, to say it? To believe it? And what does that mean, the rest?"—and the hypothesis finally has to be discarded and replaced by another whose explanatory (or conciliatory) powers will face the same trial and eventual failure. The volume exhibits this constant back-and-forth motion from its very beginning: "Suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn't anymore, I couldn't go on."⁵⁸ The text tries on or attempts one beginning ("Suddenly"), then immediately discards that beginning and replaces it with another, more satisfactory attempt ("no, at last, long last"), one that will eventually prove equally doomed to failure. Still, the series of trials presses on towards an exhaustiveness that can only be approached but never reached:

Did I try everything, ferret in every hold, secretly, silently, patiently, listening?
I'm in earnest, as so often, I'd like to be sure I left no stone unturned before reporting me missing and giving up.⁵⁹

This passage, the beginning of Text 7, emphasizes the essayistic qualities of the Texts even more clearly in the French:

⁵⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 107.

Ai-je tout essayé, bien fouiné partout, doucement, en écoutant avec patience, sans faire de bruit? Je parle sérieusement, comme souvent, j'aimerais savoir si j'ai tout fait, avant de me porter manquant, et d'abandonner.⁶⁰

Not only does the text indicate that is in the process of “*essayer*,” but the more pronounced and prominent deployment of the conditional tense (“*j’aimerais savoir si j’ai tout fait*”) expresses the work’s constant hesitation, its refusal to end, and the attitude of vigilant testing that characterizes the aesthetic “*Wörterstürmeri*.”

2.2 “FIDELITY TO FAILURE”

For Beckett, the conditional nature of the trial and the refusal to resolve the work evince a negative desire to spurn conventional narrative structures whose historical relevance and viability have long since past; this negativity stems from Beckett’s cognizance of his own lateness, which thus determines the form of the work. At the same time, however, the impetus and historical perspective that give rise to this negativity also yield a positive *ethos*—an attitude adopted towards the process that produces the work—that drives the aesthetic. I have been calling this aesthetic procedure “*essayistic*,” in the sense that the “*Wörterstürmeri*” that assaults literary forms, conventions, and language simultaneously *assays* or tests these things; and in doing so, I have implied certain formal and procedural affinities between Beckett’s prose fiction and the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne. Elaborating those affinities will further illuminate Beckett’s literary *ethos*.

⁶⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1958), 175.

The attitude of vigilance toward the habitual that prevents the work's resolution, as discussed in the preceding pages, resonates with the passage from Montaigne that stands as an epigraph to this chapter. In his essay, "On Repenting," Montaigne describes the task that his volume of Essais undertakes:

This is a register of varied and changing occurrences, of ideas which are unresolved and, when needs be, contradictory, either because I myself have become different or because I grasp hold of different attributes or aspects of my subjects. So I may happen to contradict myself but, as Demades said, I never contradict truth. If my soul could only find a footing I would not be assaying myself [*m'essaierais*] but resolving [*résoudrais*] myself. But my soul is ever in its apprenticeship and being tested [*en épreuve*].⁶¹

In the effort to present his reader with "the whole Form of the human condition,"⁶² Montaigne submits himself to a perpetual apprenticeship or trial—which he calls *m'essaier*—a continuous process of testing that will necessarily change, as its subject matter—himself—is in constant flux. He cannot allow his soul to gain a "footing," an anchoring point that would stabilize and fix the image of himself, because doing so "would not be assaying [him]self but resolving [him]self;" he would be giving up on the trial, the *essai*, and giving in to the stable, reliable self-image that habit creates at every moment. If he wishes to continue the *essai*, he must remain vigilant against habit; or, as he puts it, "To finish the job I only need to contribute fidelity,"⁶³ that is, fidelity to his changing subject matter. If Montaigne wants to produce an image of himself in the complexity and variability of his historicity, he must faithfully record every change in

⁶¹ Montaigne, Complete Essays, 908.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 908.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 908. Montaigne's French reads, "Pour la parfaire, je n'ai besoin d'y apporter que la fidélité." Quoted in Michel de Montaigne, Essais III, ed. Pierre Michel (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2003), 45.

character, disposition, opinion, and judgment that he undergoes, even if doing so introduces inconsistencies or contradictions into his presentation. To remove these contradictions, to stabilize the image of himself and resolve the work, would entail a falsification of himself, a violation of method, and a breach of fidelity. Montaigne's volume, thus, comprises an unfinished series of self-portraits that exhibit him in various instances of his apprenticeship: studying classical history, weighing ethical problems, judging past and present military strategies, evaluating Europe's recent discovery of the American continents, and so on. Each attempt to assay himself can only, like Rembrandt's self-portraits, illuminate one facet of himself at a single moment in time, casting the rest into shadow. There can be no question of "resolving [him]self," of presenting every facet simultaneously and for all time, so, to remain faithful, the trial must continue. Insofar as the Essais adhere to the criterion of "fidelity," they must remain unresolved as a necessary consequence of the method itself. At the heart of this emergent literary genre, then, we find an ethical attitude and criterion—"fidelity"—that determines the genre's open-ended form.

Beckett evinces a similar *ethos* in the oft-cited "Three Dialogues," as he elaborates a new attitude towards art characterized by a "fidelity to failure."⁶⁴ In discussing the paintings of Tal Coat, Masson, and Bram van Velde, Beckett notes that the latter stakes out a new aesthetic direction by finally refusing to participate in the endeavor that has characterized the entire history of the art, namely, the effort (inevitably met with failure) to perfect the representation of the world by establishing a stable relation between artist and occasion, subject and object, representer and represented:

⁶⁴ Beckett, "Three Dialogues," Disjecta, 145.

The history of painting, here we go again, is the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure, by means of more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between representer and representee, in a kind of tropism towards a light as to the nature of which the best opinions continue to vary, and with a kind of Pythagorean terror, as though the irrationality of pi were an offense against the deity, not to mention his creature. My case, since I am in the dock, is that van Velde is the first to desist from this estheticized automatism, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living.⁶⁵

As in the letter to Kaun and the ending of the Texts for Nothing, Beckett's reflections on the history of painting express his weariness with a topic that has already been discussed repeatedly and exhaustingly, before he even arrived: "here we go again," taking up the same tired questions, repeating yet again the same old problems. Van Velde, Beckett claims, turns away from these problems and bases his painting not on the effort to succeed, finally, where the entire history of painting has failed before him—stabilizing, at last, the relation between artist and occasion—but on the inevitable failure of that effort. This decision, this turning away, bears both aesthetic and ethical import, since to "shrink" from failure as an aesthetic desideratum would be "desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living:" the acceptance of habit's comforts, the submission to working within the domain of the already-domesticated, the already-exhausted, the "plane of the feasible."⁶⁶ This new artistic *ethos* must persistently pursue failure (even at the expense of the comforts of "living") which the habituated categories, "artist" and "occasion," threaten to assimilate and domesticate at every moment:

⁶⁵ Ibid., 145.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 139.

I know that all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation.⁶⁷

As with Montaigne, bringing the matter “to an acceptable conclusion” requires breaching the “fidelity to failure,” even a momentary lapse in which would “restor[e] him, safe and sound, to the bosom of Saint Luke.”⁶⁸ Beckett resists the seduction of the “acceptable conclusion,” however, as he remains faithful to failure even in the formulation of this new artistic attitude and *ethos*. He presents these ideas in the form of a dialogue between B and D, in which B articulates what appears to be Beckett’s position but consistently loses the argument: the first dialogue, on Tal Coat, closes with D reducing B to silence; the second, on Masson, ends as B exits in tears; and the final dialogue, on van Velde, ends with B admitting, “Yes, yes, I am mistaken, I am mistaken.”⁶⁹ Rather than making his argument triumphantly overmaster the false problems of the “history of painting”—which, after all, would only make his point the latest development within that history—Beckett deliberately adopts the weaker position and presents it as such; and he faithfully adheres to it through three crushing defeats.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibid., 145.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 143.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 145.

⁷⁰ In a now famous 1956 interview with Israel Shenker for the New York Times, Beckett articulates his adherence to the weaker position as follows: “The kind of work I do is one in which I’m not master of my material...I’m working with impotence, ignorance. I don’t think impotence has been exploited in the past.” Quoted in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman, eds., Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 148.

2.3 THE CARTESIAN BECKETT

While the negativity of Beckett's literary aesthetic and the emphasis that it places on "failure" have been widely noted, little attention has been paid to the *fidelity* to failure, which, as I've argued above, entails a literary *ethos* that drives an essayistic literary practice, which resonates strongly with Montaigne's literary project in the Essais. It comes as no surprise, then, that few critics have commented on the affinities between Beckett's works and the Essais, as they have focused instead on Beckett and Descartes, a figure antithetical to Montaigne. Those rare critics who actually link Beckett and Montaigne directly usually present them as each other's foils: either Montaigne represents a conservative, aristocratic humanism that the radical Beckettian aesthetic eschews and supersedes;⁷¹ or, alternatively, Montaigne's solitude, the necessary condition for his perpetual apprenticeship, is championed "as an antidote to modern man's alienation, the Sartrean distrust of others, and the disintegration and gradual loss of self in the works of Samuel Beckett."⁷² By contrast, the concern for Beckett's interest in Descartes, in particular, and questions epistemological, in general, has dominated the critical literature on Beckett—at least, among Anglo-American critics—almost since its inception. Early essays by Samuel Mintz,⁷³ Ruby Cohn,⁷⁴ and Frederick Hoffman⁷⁵ charted and catalogued Cartesian allusions and concepts in Beckett's work; more recent studies by James Acheson⁷⁶ and Richard

⁷¹ See, for example, Neal Oxenhandler, "Toward the New Aesthetic," Contemporary Literature 11.2 (Spring, 1970), 169-191.

⁷² Francis S. Heck, "The Meaning of Solitude in Montaigne's 'Essays,'" The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association 25.3 (September, 1971), 97.

⁷³ Samuel I. Mintz, "Beckett's Murphy: A 'Cartesian' Novel," Perspective 11 (Autumn, 1959): 156-165.

⁷⁴ Ruby Cohn, "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett," Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

⁷⁵ Frederick J. Hoffman, "The Elusive Ego: Beckett's M's," Samuel Beckett Now: Critical Approaches to His Novels, Poetry, and Plays, ed. by Melvin J. Friedman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

⁷⁶ Acheson, Samuel Beckett's Artistic Theory and Practice.

Begam⁷⁷ approach the same questions from a different angle, arguing that Beckett's works index the disintegration of the Cartesian project and the modern philosophical tradition that it engendered, obliterating the modern rational subject and yielding epistemological indeterminacy. All of these critics would read the passages from the Texts for Nothing presented above along epistemological lines, as dramatizations of the effort to ground clear and distinct knowledge and/or the disintegration of that project. Here, the *oeuvre* appears as a systematic, if despondent, engagement with the history of modern philosophy,⁷⁸ rather than a sustained, essayistic, generative literary practice that, after all, supported a six decades-long literary career. For Hugh Kenner, whose incisive works, Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study and Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians, represent this critical trend most powerfully, Beckett belongs to the genealogy of Enlightenment Stoics who view the world as a closed field of finite, knowable, and exhaustible possibilities. According to this reading, Beckett ultimately represents the apotheosis of the dehumanization of man and the end of the European humanist tradition, a civilizational apocalypse that, for Kenner, stands as the logical culmination of the Cartesian epistemological project. I will outline Kenner's argument in more detail in what follows, as his account of Beckett's lateness—wherein Beckett stands as the emblem of the European apocalypse—represents a prevalent interpretation of Beckett that opposes my own, and the contrast between the two will help to illuminate the latter.

Kenner locates the literary and intellectual culture of the European Enlightenment at the confluence of two complementary trajectories: the growing influence of the philosophy of

⁷⁷ Richard Begam, Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁷⁸ Begam's work, especially, reads Beckett's novels as adhering to a systematic philosophical program, as he argues that Beckett's first five novels (excluding the posthumously-published Dream of Fair to Middling Women)—Murphy, Watt, Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable—enact a gradual and progressive destruction of the Cartesian philosophical project and its legacy.

Descartes—the “philosophy which has stood behind all subsequent philosophies, and which makes the whole of intelligible reality depend on the mental processes of a solitary man”⁷⁹—and the full exploitation of Gutenberg’s printing technology. The former introduces the “burden of one who is conscious that he is conscious, since the seventeenth century a peculiarly Western burden;”⁸⁰ the latter transforms language, once “the graph of speech,”⁸¹ into a “closed field”⁸² of moveable parts whose possible arrangements on the page form a finite and exhaustible set. Together, these trajectories yield the idea of a circular form of consciousness—closed, insular, always reflecting upon itself and upon the fact that it is reflecting upon itself, *ad infinitum*—along with the emergence of literary artifacts whose technological means of production express this same insularity and enclosure: “the Gutenberg Revolution transformed literary composition into a potentially Stoical act,”⁸³ as the writer now selects from a closed set the elements to be combined on the page.

The novel as a literary form emerges within this intellectual and literary culture and embodies its circularity. For Kenner, the novel is inherently concerned with epistemological problems: it has dispensed with the appeal to the Muse, so its narration is plagued with the logical question of how the narrator, who is himself part of the world and story that he narrates, came by his information. The problem ultimately takes on the circular logic of “the paradox of the Cretan liar: all Cretans are liars, said the man from Crete. It has always been inherent in the novel, the supposed narrator of which is part of the narration.”⁸⁴ Having foregone all claims to divine inspiration, the novelist eventually has to admit that the story that he tells has been made

⁷⁹ Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, 2nd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 17.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸¹ Hugh Kenner, *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1962), xiii.

⁸² *Ibid.*, xv.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

up, a product of his own mind: “the fiction writer’s job,” Kenner says, “is telling lies.”⁸⁵ Thus, Kenner finds the “very heart of novel writing” to be “a man in a room writing things out of his head while every breath he draws brings death nearer.”⁸⁶ Writing a novel, then, imitates the Cartesian circle of self-consciousness whose circumference encloses the world within the mind: just as, for Descartes, all knowledge of the world may be reduced to the mind’s consciousness of its own consciousness, so the world of the novel may be reduced to the “solitary ordeal”⁸⁷ of its own composition; and, indeed, Kenner argues, Descartes’ “journey to the famous room with the stove foreshadows the novelist’s journey to the room where one writes day after day, alone.”⁸⁸ Kenner applies the epithet, “Stoic Comedian,” to those novelists—Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett being foremost among these—who exploit the novel’s inherent circularity and, thus, reveal the novel’s true nature: “to be (who can doubt it?) a sheaf of papers filled by a man alone in a room, writing.”⁸⁹ They write novels that take stock of themselves *qua* novels and, more generally, *qua* books, as arrangements of a finite set of letters on the page. These writers ultimately bring the genre to a state of self-conscious circularity that is inherent in its Cartesian foundations and that is, like the philosophical genealogy that Descartes inaugurates, finally a dead end, a creative impasse from which nothing new can be made.

Beckett represents, in Kenner’s account, the apotheosis of this development: the Comedian of the Impasse, the writer whose fiction begins from the premise that it can only endlessly repeat the scene of its own writing. Here, Kenner argues, the novelist confronts his own predicament, sitting in a room filling pages about sitting in a room filling pages; and, with

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁸⁶ Kenner, *Samuel Beckett*, 62.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸⁹ Kenner, *The Stoic Comedians*, 83.

each successive work, “the circle tightens, the equation grows more compact,”⁹⁰ reducing the universe until “all that is written pertains to a mental world, circumscribed in content, constant in method, its boundary the skull, its terms the synapses, and its laws, so far as it can manage, those of logic.”⁹¹ If, within this finite and restricted world, Beckett’s narrators produce seemingly endless streams of language that consistently fail to reach resolution, this is only because the circumference of the circle that encloses that world may be traversed infinitely. The field of possibilities can be enlarged no further, and thus, Beckett’s works represent, for Kenner, the culmination of the dual trajectories of Enlightenment—Descartes’ reduction of all knowledge to an infinitely repeated act of solipsism and Gutenberg’s reduction of language to a closed set of moveable parts—that have “landed western civilization in its present fix.”⁹² the death of the European humanist tradition and of creative possibility. Beckett stands at the end of this development—an apocalyptic figure, the quintessential modernist—looking back on the history of Europe and closing it off, finally, in an act of literary apotheosis.

2.4 ASSAYING THE HYPOTHETICAL: WATT

Beckett’s connection to the genealogy of the Enlightenment Stoics, according to Kenner, may be seen most clearly in his mid-1940s novel, Watt, whose peculiar form and procedure pick up where the “Ithaca” episode of Ulysses left off: a “comedy of the inventory,”⁹³ an encyclopedic effort to encompass and master the world of the novel by listing and exhausting, in the most

⁹⁰ Kenner, Samuel Beckett, 25.

⁹¹ Kenner, The Stoic Comedians, 101.

⁹² Kenner, Samuel Beckett, 16.

⁹³ Kenner, The Stoic Comedians, 77.

logical form it can muster, the entire field of possible actions that may be undertaken within its pages. As a novelistic inventory, *Watt* actually outstrips *Ulysses*, Kenner argues, for, while Joyce's novel exhausts the actions that occur within it, Beckett's novel exhausts the entire field of *possible* actions, including those not exercised. Hence Watt, trying to decipher the arrangement by which Mr. Knott's occasional table scraps always found a famished dog at a particular hour, "considered, not only some of those solutions that had apparently not prevailed, but also some of those objections that were perhaps the cause of their not having done so, distributed as follows:"

| <i>Solutions</i> | <i>Number of Objections</i> |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 st | 2 |
| 2 nd | 3 |
| 3 rd | 4 |
| 4 th | 5 |

| <i>Number of Solutions</i> | <i>Number of Objections</i> |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 4 | 14 |
| 3 | 9 |
| 2 | 5 |
| 1 | 2 ⁹⁴ |

Figure 1. Watt's table of solutions and objections.

Beckett's inventory encompasses action and possibility more abstractly and more generally than Joyce's; for, while the latter considers Bloom's specific route through Dublin at particular times

⁹⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1953), 97-98.

of day on 16 June 1904, the former considers “Watt’s way of advancing due east, for example,”⁹⁵ the analysis of which may presumably be applied to his way of advancing in any direction, in any place, and at any time. Everything gets subsumed into this inventory as a set of data and all of its possible permutations: the paths that may be traversed between the door, the window, the fire, and the bed; the looks that pass among a committee of five men engaged in the effort to exchange looks with each of the other members; the possible arrangements of four pieces of furniture in four locations within a room; and so on. The inventory extends to language itself, as Watt begins to systematically invert first the order of the letters in the words that he speaks; then the order of the words in each sentence; then the order of the sentences in the period; then the order of the letters in the words and the words in the sentences; then the order of the letters in the words and the sentences in the period; then the order of the words in the sentences and the sentences in the period; and finally, the order of the letters in the words, the words in the sentences, and the sentences in the period, such that even language becomes a mere arrangement of data, the mastery of which the novel displays by enumerating its possible permutations. Ultimately, Kenner reads Watt’s pedantic style as a “technical narcissism” that is “expanded into a kind of aesthetic principle,”⁹⁶ a “fiction which is at the same time an exercise in symmetry and ritual,”⁹⁷ a formal *tour de force*, an exhibition of technical mastery that reduces the materials of the novel and its world to closed sets of manipulable data.

If the novel seeks this kind of Joycean mastery, however, then it consistently fails, because the sets never fully close. When considering, for example, the “frequent changes of

⁹⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁹⁶ Kenner, Samuel Beckett, 98.

⁹⁷ Kenner, The Stoic Comedians, 81.

position, both absolute and relative,”⁹⁸ to which Mr. Knott subjects the furniture in his bedroom, the novel produces two densely printed pages that list the possible arrangements of four pieces of furniture (the tallboy, the dressing-table, the nightstool, and the washhand-stand) in four locations around the room (by the fire, by the bed, by the door, and by the window) and with each piece standing on one of five different sides (on its feet, on its head, on its face, on its back, and on its side). Each of these arrangements, we are told, was “not at all rare,”

to consider only, over a period of nineteen days only, the tallboy, the dressing-table, the nightstool and the washhand-stand, and their feet, and heads, and faces, and backs and unspecified sides, and the fire, and the bed, and the door, and the window, not at all rare.

For the chairs also, to mention only the chairs also, were never still.

For the corners also, to mention only the corners also, were seldom vacant.⁹⁹

The number of variables considered has been arbitrarily limited to produce what only appears to be a manageable list of permutations (if such a list may be called “manageable”), while additional variables remain unconsidered. Likewise, when Watt analyzes the daily changes in Mr. Knott’s physical appearance, the novel churns out another two pages listing the possible permutations of fluctuating figure, stature, skin, and hair, “to mention only the figure, stature, skin and hair:”

For daily changed, as well as these, in carriage, expression, shape and size, the feet, the legs, the hands, the arms, the mouth, the nose, the eyes, the ears, to

⁹⁸ Beckett, *Watt*, 204.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

mention only the feet, the legs, the hands, the arms, the mouth, the nose, the eyes, the ears, and their carriage, expression, shape and size.¹⁰⁰

The description continues in this manner for another three paragraphs. Producing lists of permutations to describe Mr. Knott's protean appearance expands the novel considerably; incorporating the additional variables enumerated at the end into the combinatorial analysis would further expand the novel, exponentially; and yet, even this would not exhaust the matter, as each variable listed is accompanied by a corresponding assurance that there still remain other variables beyond those mentioned. Kenner might call this passage "an exercise in symmetry and ritual,"¹⁰¹ but this exercise does not enclose or master the material at hand. Even if we imagine the novel continuing to list the other variables not yet considered, the "symmetry and ritual" of the passage's structure would necessitate that such a list take the form, "For *x*, *y*, and *z* also changed daily, to mention only *x*, *y*, and *z*." The permutations and combinations of Mr. Knott's attributes would continue to increase exponentially, but the final enclosure and mastery of the elements involved would be perpetually deferred.

Here, the material exhausts the writer, not the other way around. Beckett's relentless adherence to the rigor of Watt's procedure *prevents* formal closure and creates not the self-satisfaction of one in absolute control of the work, but a fatigue whose symptoms appear repeatedly throughout the novel. When Watt, trying to determine by what system the series of servants enter and exit Mr. Knott's employ, considers the hypothetical servants Tom, Dick, Harry, and the other who follows Harry, the narration indulges in a brief editorial intrusion:

But Tom's two years on the first floor are not *because of* Dick's two years on the ground floor, or of Harry's coming then, and Dick's two years on the ground floor

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 211.

¹⁰¹ Kenner, The Stoic Comedians, 81.

are not *because of* Tom's two years on the first floor, or of Harry's coming then, and Harry's coming then is not *because of* Tom's two years on the first floor, or of Dick's two years on the ground floor, and Dick's ten years on the first floor are not *because of* Harry's ten years on the ground floor, or of the other's coming then, and Harry's ten years on the ground floor are not *because of* Dick's ten years on the first floor, or of the other's coming then, and the other's coming then is not *because of* (tired of underlining this cursed preposition) Dick's ten years on the first floor, or of Harry's ten years on the ground floor.¹⁰²

The parenthetical interjection draws attention to the fatigue and exhaustion that ensue as inevitable results of Beckett's fidelity to Watt's unusual procedure. The novel ends in a similar manner, with eight pages of Addenda whose opening footnote advises us that the "following precious and illuminating material should be carefully studied. Only fatigue and disgust prevented its incorporation."¹⁰³ To have incorporated this material (as well as the additional variables noted in the passages above, to mention only the additional variables noted in the passages above) into the novel would have certainly extended the work exponentially, if not infinitely. Subjecting the novel's elements to a particular logical procedure does not, then, reduce those elements to a closed set of manipulable data, nor does it exhaust the field of the novel's possibilities; rather, it expands that field beyond the reach of enclosure. Beckett's fidelity—bound as it is to the insufficient capacities of the body—to that procedure eventually reaches its limit, and he has no choice but to end in fatigue and disgust, defeated.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Beckett, Watt, 134, emphasis in the original.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 247n.

¹⁰⁴ This fatigue extends even to Watt's characters: Arthur, having recounted for pages without progress the series of unreciprocated looks that pass among the five members of an academic committee, "seemed to tire, of his story"(197), and he ultimately abandons it mid-sentence.

The inclusion of the Addenda as the novel's unincorporated detritus, however, at least leaves lingering traces of the abandoned work that prevent it from becoming "embalmed" as a unified whole.¹⁰⁵ In an early critical writing, "Proust in Pieces," Beckett castigates a certain Professor Feuillerat for "embalming" À la Recherche du Temps Perdu by trying to recover Proust's original intention and reconstruct the novel as it "should" have been: a unified, cohesive work without the clutter, the "perturbations and dislocations of the text as it stands"¹⁰⁶ in its present condition. Beckett argues that Professor Feuillerat's effort to clean up and resolve the work in this way misses the point entirely, as Proust's "book is the *search*, stated in the full complexity of all its clues and blind alleys, for that resolution, and not the *compte rendu* after the event of a round trip."¹⁰⁷ For Beckett, the work hinges on Proust's adherence to a particular procedure, *la recherche*, even though this adherence prevents the work from achieving the neat cohesion that Professor Feuillerat demands from a novel. By the same token, from Watt onward, Beckett's works adhere to procedures that prevent them from resolving or ending, as we've seen in both Watt and the Texts For Nothing; but since Beckett cannot actually continue these processes indefinitely, the only way that he can end without succumbing to the "acceptable conclusion" is to abort the work mid-labor and publish the discharge. Hence, Watt's Addenda, which provide an early articulation of what would become a characteristic theme in Beckett's *oeuvre*: the abandoned, aborted, or jettisoned work. To be sure, Beckett actually cast off a number of works—"Premier Amour," Eleutheria, Mercier et Camier—as inadequate or substandard, but just as frequently, the theme of the abandoned or aborted work serves as a necessary device that permits the work to end, however provisionally, as in From an Abandoned

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Beckett, "Proust in Pieces," Disjecta, 63-65.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 65, emphasis added.

Work, the Texts for Nothing, and the Foirades. In this light, Watt appears not as the apotheosis of the Enlightenment Stoicism whose literary genealogy includes Flaubert and Joyce—masters of their material who sit calmly behind their works, disinterestedly paring their nails—but as an abortion, as the waste left behind by the attempt, finally abandoned in fatigue, to pursue failure to the limits of language and literary form.

The pivotal scene with the piano tuners, the Galls father and son—“perhaps the principal incident of Watt’s early days in Mr. Knott’s house”¹⁰⁸ and “the first and type of many”¹⁰⁹ such events—will best illustrate this latter point. The scene itself, in its initial narration, proceeds simply enough: the piano tuners knock on the door; Watt lets them into the house and escorts them to the piano; the tuners find the piano’s interior to be in tatters; and they claim that the piano, the piano-tuner, and the pianist are all “doomed.”¹¹⁰ But here, the scene takes an unexpected turn, for it “was not ended, when it was past, but continued to unfold” for Watt, establishing an unsettling precedent for other events that would occur during his stay in Mr. Knott’s house: “It resembled [these future events] in the vigour with which it developed a purely plastic content, and gradually lost, in the nice processes of its light, its sound, its impacts and its rhythm, all meaning, even the most literal.”¹¹¹ Watt quickly loses the ability to assimilate the event into recognizable terms, accept that the event took place, and then forget it: “If he had been able to accept it, then perhaps it would not have revisited him, and this would have been a great saving of vexation, to put it mildly.”¹¹² But this event and the others that would follow continue to resist any formulation that affords Watt this comfort:

¹⁰⁸ Beckett, Watt, 72.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 76.

Watt could perhaps accept them for what they were, the simple games that time plays with space, now with these toys, and now with those, but was obliged, because of his peculiar character, to enquire into what they meant, oh not into what they really meant, his character was not so peculiar as all that, but into what they might be induced to mean, with the help of a little patience, a little ingenuity.¹¹³

As words begin to fail Watt, as they become inadequate to the task of describing events in the world, we catch a glimpse of the role of language in the novel. Watt does not concern himself, here, with what the events *actually* mean or whether language can adequately capture that meaning; he desires comfort, the relief from vexation that comes with allowing words to provide closure and “exorcize” the event:¹¹⁴

But if he could say, when the knock came, the knock become a knock, or the door become a door, in his mind, presumably in his mind, whatever that might mean, Yes, I remember, that is what happened then, if then he could say that, then he thought that then the scene would end, and trouble him no more.¹¹⁵

To declare, in the past tense, that something had happened; to “induce” meaning; to create, “with the help of a little patience, a little ingenuity,” a spell that would charm the events to sleep; to formulate “a hypothesis proper to disperse them.”¹¹⁶ this would provide the comfort that Watt desires, the comfort that continues to elude him. “Not that Watt desired information, for he did not. But he desired words to be applied to his situation,”¹¹⁷ hypothetical words whose actual

¹¹³ Ibid., 75.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 78.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 77.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 78.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 81.

relation to meaning or truth is, finally, of little relevance, but which nonetheless establish provisional footholds for thought, anchoring points that temporarily stabilize the vexing chaos that will not consent to be named. What matters here, then, is not the accuracy of Watt's formulations, but the persistent process of creating in language—despite language's failure, despite the fact that the old words will no longer suffice—hypotheses that exorcize events and allow him to rest, comforted.

This process introduces certain difficulties into the narration, however, as Watt frequently formulates hypotheses whose powers of dispersion last for only a short while before needing to be replaced by a new hypothesis, which will, in turn, lose its power and need to be replaced by still another. So, we have yet another series, but we cannot even be certain of its sequence, as Watt's discarded hypotheses frequently recover their virtue and can thus be used again, for a time. This creates a peculiar predicament for the narrator, who bases his story on Watt's own testimony:

For when he speaks, for example, of the incident of the Galls father and son, does he speak of it in terms of the unique hypothesis that was required, to deal with it, and render it innocuous, or in terms of the latest, or in terms of some other of the series?¹¹⁸

The narrator has no way of knowing whether any of the events that Watt has recounted to him and that he now narrates and presents as the novel, Watt, have even taken place, or in what form, because he cannot tell which hypotheses in the series of hypotheses formulated have actually been given to him:

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 78.

To such an extent is this true, that one is sometimes tempted to wonder, with reference to two or three incidents related by Watt as separate and distinct, if they are not in reality the same incident, variously interpreted.¹¹⁹

This last suggestion bears astonishing implications. Not only can we not be certain that the sequence of events that the narrator narrates bears any resemblance to the sequence of events that actually befall Watt, we cannot even say with certainty that a sequence of events—a “plot,” as it were—actually befalls Watt. The entire novel may, in fact, consist of a single event, told repeatedly according to the unfinished series of hypotheses devised to exorcise it. The incident of the Galls father and son itself might be “only an unintelligible succession of changes, from which Watt finally extracted the Galls and the piano, in self-defence.”¹²⁰ Watt himself takes these implications further still, as he finally learns “to accept that nothing had happened, that *a* nothing had happened,”¹²¹ but “the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something,”¹²² to apply words to it and create a hypothesis that makes a something of that nothing. At its furthest extreme, the novel might consist of nothing and the series of hypotheses formulated to disperse that nothing and be comforted.

It might be tempting, here, to read the failure of Watt’s language and its ensuing consequences along epistemological lines, as a critique of the relation between language, as an arbitrary system of signs, and truth.¹²³ Or, we might reference the “unreliable narrator,” that staple of modern fiction whose often devious or self-interested narration challenges the relation between literary representation and reality. Or, we might, finally, read this passage as an

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹²¹ Ibid., 80, emphasis added.

¹²² Ibid., 77.

¹²³ See, for example, Jacqueline Hofer, “Watt,” Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

affirmation of Kenner's argument that here, the novel turns in upon itself and reflects on itself *qua* novel, as a series of lies invented by the writer. These epistemological considerations do not exhaust the matter, however. Watt, at least, has no interest in truth or lies, nor in language's ability to convey either; he only desires the comfort of closure, which he tries to achieve by creating hypotheses that will "induce" meaning. These hypotheses form an infinite series that terminates only when Watt abandons it in exhaustion:

Cracks soon appeared in this formulation.

But Watt was too tired to repair it. Watt dared not tire himself further.¹²⁴

More importantly, however, we have seen that Watt's attempts to comfort himself in the wake of the unexpected disengagement of words from things leave a remainder, a sediment, a collection of unmanageable detritus; what is more, this detritus may constitute the material of the novel itself. Watt and all of its events may, after all, be only the discharge of Watt's aborted efforts to soothe his vexation—a series of discarded hypotheses whose provisional powers of explanation and dispersion have worn off—but, *as such*, it indexes an ongoing poetic process of creation and testing whose ultimate completion can never be attained. Watt does not exhaust the possible and enclose it within the ever-tightening circle of self-consciousness; it assays the hypothetical, for which enclosure, mastery, and finality represent an asymptote that may be infinitely approached but never reached.

¹²⁴ Beckett, Watt, 148.

2.5 “UNLESSEABLE LEAST”

Arguably, the episode of the Galls father and son stands as the “first and type of many” of Beckett’s later works. Although he would never again employ as expansive and cumbersome a procedure as the one used in Watt, that novel nonetheless inaugurates a new direction—it was, after all, the first major work written after the 1937 letter to Axel Kaun—that Beckett’s fiction would pursue for decades after, in the relentless effort to “fail better.”¹²⁵ Already, in the passages discussed above, we can hear echoes across texts. Compare Watt’s

But if he could say, when the knock came, the knock become a knock, or the door become a door, in his mind, presumably in his mind, whatever that might mean, Yes, I remember, that is what happened then, if then he could say that, then he thought that then the scene would end, and trouble him no more¹²⁶

with the Texts for Nothing’s

If I said, There’s a way out there, there’s a way out somewhere, the rest would come. What am I waiting for then, to say it? To believe it? And what does that mean, the rest? Shall I answer, try and answer, or go on as though I had asked nothing?¹²⁷

Both works formulate hypotheses in the conditional tense, as provisional efforts to attain a closure and comfort whose final achievement remains perpetually, tantalizingly, beyond the works’ reach. Compare, again, with the later prose work, Company:

¹²⁵ Samuel Beckett, Worstward Ho, Nohow On (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 89.

¹²⁶ Beckett, Watt, 77.

¹²⁷ Beckett, Texts for Nothing, 117.

Another trait its repetitiousness. Repeatedly with only minor variants the same bygone. As if willing him by this dint to make it his. To confess, Yes I remember. Perhaps even to have a voice. To murmur, Yes I remember. What an addition to company that would be! A voice in the first person singular. Murmuring now and then, Yes I remember.¹²⁸

Here, we find none of the myriad objects and locales—houses, train stations, parks, gardens, windows, fireplaces, tallboys, fences, kitchens, beds—that populate Watt's world. Indeed, Company sets its scene in fewer than ten words: "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine."¹²⁹ Nonetheless, the hypothetical value of the affirmation, "Yes, I remember," remains consistent across these works and the more than three decades that separate them. In the former work, Watt's inability to say of the incident with the piano tuners, "Yes, I remember," epitomizes his failure to formulate the words that would assimilate the event into an intelligible narrative and render it familiar and innocuous. In the latter work, voices in the dark tell stories and try to coerce the listener to confess, "Yes, I remember," words that, if uttered, would create the listener as the subject, in the first person, of those actions, which would in turn become his past, his life, a story that could be narrated just like any other; and this listener-turned-speaker, having made this concession to the familiar functions of language and the meanings that it induces, would become a great "addition to company." Despite the vast differences in style and procedure, Company finds Beckett still testing the same hypothesis: "Yes, I remember." In both works, the ability or inability to posit this hypothesis probes the same questions of habit and its relation to language and narrative form.

¹²⁸ Samuel Beckett, Company, Nohow On (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 10.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Company assays this hypothesis more economically than Watt, however, without the maddening lists or the clutter of the *Addenda*. The question of whether the listener will acknowledge and assimilate narrated events by making an utterance in the first person and the past tense forms the entire premise and situation of Company, while Watt has to work such matters into a novel that still includes many of the conventional features of the genre: multiple characters, settings, actions, conversations, and the like. The later work's concision should not be understood, however, as a reduction of the field of possibility or the enclosure of the problem within a tighter, more manageable circumference, but as a new, arguably more elegant, formulation of the question that still retains the open-ended, essayistic quality of testing that we noted in the earlier works. Company's ending,

And you as you always were.

Alone.¹³⁰

may appear to provide closure and finality, as it narrows down to a one-word paragraph, centered on the page and focused on the enclosed emptiness of the long “o” sound, and it seems to make a coherent philosophical statement regarding the character's essential solitude. But the words that, having no other choice, the ending employs attest to the continuation, not the conclusion, of the work's processes. By this point, Company has already established the second person accusative “you” as part of the voices' tactics to coerce an “I” from the listener, and we recognize the past tense relative clause, “as you always were,” as only the latest attempt to foist a past upon that “I.” The predicate adjective, “alone,” merely modifies the past that the voices want the listener to take on by murmuring, “Yes, I remember,” and becoming part of company. This “alone” is not alone at all, but the story of a life, complete with beginning, middle, and end—I was alone, I

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

am alone, I will be alone—formulated for company. Without the acknowledgement, “Yes, I remember,” the “alone” has no bearing on the listener. Even with that acknowledgement, the “alone” would only be hypothetical and conditional: if he could say, “Yes, I remember,” then he would have always been alone. The elegant economy of Company’s ending thus belies an ongoing and unresolved process that assays the hypothesis, “Yes, I remember.”

Even in the concise “closed space” works of Beckett’s later years, then, we find the same attitude of vigilant testing that characterizes the sprawling, constantly self-questioning works of the ‘40s and ‘50s. The most seemingly self-enclosed of Beckett’s prose works still retains what Pascale Casanova calls an “irreducible residue,”¹³¹ a lingering trace that attests to the work that has taken place but could not be finished. Casanova does not pursue the implications of this insight, however, as her Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution—whose focus on the process and impetus that generates the *oeuvre*, rather than its supposed “message,” otherwise resonates strongly with my own argument in this chapter—argues that Beckett’s works achieve a literary abstraction and an aesthetic autonomy that allows literature to finally “catch up” to the aesthetic avant-garde in other arts, specifically painting and music. The creation of an “autonomous” literature, for Casanova, means first disengaging language from nationalism and its politics—hence, Beckett’s flight from the Ireland of Yeats and O’Casey—and, subsequently, disabling “all the ordinary conditions of possibility of literature—the subject, memory, imagination, narration, character, psychology, space and time, and so forth”—dismantling, freeing itself from “the whole historical edifice of literature,”¹³² down to and ultimately

¹³¹ Pascale Casanova, Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2006), 23.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 12. Targeting the relation between literature and nationalism means engaging the history of literature in Europe since Dante, which Beckett most certainly does. I will address Beckett’s reading of Dante in the next chapter.

including the referentiality of words themselves. Casanova recognizes the final achievement of this autonomy in Beckett's early 1980s work, Worstward Ho: "With Worstward Ho Beckett created a pure object of language, which is totally autonomous since it refers to nothing but itself."¹³³ Furthermore, she claims that

what counts at the end, in the endgame, is not the disappearance, the final failure of the text, but instead a project that determines its end once the rule, the algorithm, has exhausted all its possibilities. The last words, repeated from the programme clearly announced at the beginning ("Said nohow on") resonate like a cry of victory: the success of the worst of failures.¹³⁴

Here, Casanova's formalist reading of Worstward Ho reprises Kenner's reading of Watt, though their final judgments differ: for Kenner, Watt's enclosed circularity represents the culmination of the Enlightenment stoicism that threatens to destroy the great humanist tradition of the European Renaissance, while for Casanova, Worstward Ho's self-enclosure marks the victorious achievement of literary abstraction that finally ushers literature into modernity. Nonetheless, both critics read Beckett's works as being entirely self-referential, such that the work represents only the process of its own creation: that is, the work is the process itself. For Casanova, the pursuit of failure succeeds when the process cuts off all external referents and turns inward upon itself.

¹³³ Ibid., 26. It is worth noting the differences between Casanova's conception of "autonomous" literature and the conception that Adorno advances as opposed to "committed" literature in his essay on "Commitment." For Adorno, the gesture of refusal that autonomous literature makes by contesting the prevailing conventions of literature bears cultural and political implications, far greater, he argues, than those that follow from openly "committed" literature that wears its ideology on its sleeve and tries to convey it through a transparently "realist" literary mode; that is, autonomous literature remains engaged in the world *by virtue of* (not in spite of) the gesture of refusal that characterizes its drive towards autonomy. For Casanova, Beckett's drive towards aesthetic autonomy *begins* with a politically motivated gesture of refusal (specifically, the refusal of the politics of Irish nationalist literature), but the final achievement of this autonomy occurs only once the work has freed itself completely from all external referents. See T.W. Adorno, "Commitment," Aesthetics and Politics, ed. by Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 2002).

¹³⁴ Ibid., 26.

Yet, the persistence of the “irreducible residue,” the “Unlessenable least,”¹³⁵ even in Worstward Ho, indicates the continued failure of the work that prevents it from hermetically sealing itself off from the outside world and achieving complete autonomy. While the work may have dispensed with plot, characters, settings, conventional syntax, even meaning, it cannot finally eliminate the word as the material trace of an ongoing process of testing and elaboration. Casanova deftly demonstrates how Worstward Ho’s “aesthetic of lessness”¹³⁶ gradually and progressively strips the word of its conventional meanings and functions on the way to abstraction, but the final achievement of the “literature of the *unword*” that Beckett first articulates in the 1937 letter to Axel Kaun remains beyond the work’s reach. The process that Casanova calls “abstractivation”—“a dynamic peculiar to each text, which proceeds from words to the withdrawal of meaning—that is, from meaning to delivering realist representation its quietus”¹³⁷—leaves a residue, a byproduct, a sediment: the words on the page or, more directly, the work itself. We’ve already seen, in Watt, that the failure of words and their referentiality, the “withdrawal of meaning” that “[delivers] realist representation its quietus,” is not enough to produce a self-enclosed, abstract algorithm that runs until it has exhausted its possibilities; it produces, rather, an unfinishable series of discarded hypotheses, a lingering remainder that the algorithm can neither eliminate nor accommodate within its functions. In Worstward Ho, too, the persistence of legible traces—the work does not resist being read altogether, after all—shows that, while the work may, in fact, “fail better” than those that preceded it, it does not achieve complete autonomy. Its assault on language and “the whole historical edifice of literature” remains an assay that operates from within that edifice. The work, therefore, is not its own

¹³⁵ Beckett, Worstward Ho, 106.

¹³⁶ Casanova, 22.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

process; it is the residue or the waste left behind by a process that, had it succeeded, would have left no traces whatsoever. It is the bent grass and broken branches attesting to the passage of one who could not efface his tracks entirely or render the trail completely illegible. While Beckett's works may pursue failure and the unword in the direction of abstraction, faithfully assaying the limits of legibility, the works cannot, of necessity, achieve the autonomy that Casanova claims for them, the freedom from the history of language and literature in the West; and, after all, the attainment of such freedom would only be another way of stabilizing the relation between "artist" and "occasion"—separating them entirely—and thus breaching the fidelity to failure. Paradoxically, the "Wörterstürmerei" that tests the conventions and forms that characterize that history in the effort to destroy them serves to preserve them and prolong their usage. The works' very presence as the discharge of the "Wörterstürmerei" attests to the continuing failure of the supposed drive towards literary autonomy and indexes the persistent, if only faintly legible, traces of the history that the works cannot efface.

2.6 "OTHERWISE THAN UNAWARES"

"Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares?"¹³⁸ the Unnamable asks. Can one deliberately establish a literary practice that perpetually withholds credence from and refuses submission to the language and literary forms that, having no other choice, it employs? This question lies at the heart of the Beckettian literary project: the "Wörterstürmerei" whose destructive aesthetic also enacts a process of testing and experimentation; the fidelity to an essayistic literary *ethos*

¹³⁸ Beckett, The Unnamable, 291.

that pursues failure and remains vigilant against the habitual comforts of the “acceptable conclusion;” the aborted hypotheses that assay the limits of literature’s legibility and index the persistent, indelible traces of the literary history that the *oeuvre* presents as having already fallen into decline. Here, we find neither triumphant aesthetic mastery nor a Stoic reduction of the world to a closed field of exhaustible elements and possibilities; rather, we find an ongoing process of creation and experimentation operating at the limits of language and literary form. If this process does not yield cultural or creative rebirth, neither does it herald the apocalypse of European culture; and, after all, the death and rebirth of society are only conventional literary tropes belonging to tragedy and comedy, anyway. This process leaves a residue, however, a discharge, traces of a literature and a history to which Beckett arrived too late, in the moment of its obsolescence. It remains for the next chapter to elaborate what may yet be read, what is still legible, in these traces.

3.0 READING THE VESTIGES OF EUROPE

“Dante is ‘easier to read,’ for a foreigner who does not know Italian very well, for other reasons: but all related to this central reason, that in Dante’s time Europe, with all its dissensions and dirtiness, was mentally more united than we can now conceive. It is not particularly the Treaty of Versailles that has separated nation from nation; nationalism was born long before; and the process of disintegration which for our generation culminates in that treaty began soon after Dante’s time.”

--T.S. Eliot, Dante¹³⁹

“Here is direct expression—pages and pages of it. And if you don’t understand it, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you are too decadent to receive it.”

--Samuel Beckett, “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce”¹⁴⁰

The preceding chapter began to describe the coarticulation, in Beckett’s prose fiction, of an experimental literary aesthetic with an essayistic literary *ethos* grounded in the historical consciousness of lateness. While that chapter demonstrated how that *ethos*, Beckett’s relentless fidelity to failure, generates the fiction and drives it towards the limits of literary form, it also showed that this literary practice produces a sediment or discharge, traces that index the lingering vestiges of a literary history and institution in the moment of its obsolescence. Reading

¹³⁹ T.S. Eliot, Dante, Selected Essays 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1932), 202.

¹⁴⁰ Samuel Beckett, “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce,” Disjecta, ed. by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 26.

these traces and interpreting what remains legible in them will form one of the primary objectives of this chapter.

Pursuing the question of “legibility” in relation to the historical consciousness of “lateness” will also afford us somewhat broader vistas with regard to the crisis of European civilization in the twentieth century, a crisis that T.S. Eliot, E.R. Curtius, Erich Auerbach, and others conceived as a crisis of legibility: By what mechanisms, they asked, does a civilization remain legible to itself as a continuous entity amid widespread historical change? Does the end of that continuity and the tendency towards illegibility signal the apocalyptic end of thinking? Or are new beginnings possible under new forms of intelligibility? This chapter will not only argue for the centrality of these considerations to Beckett’s literary project—pursuing the questions of “legibility” and “civilization” back to Beckett’s reading of Dante—but it will also consider “beginnings” in Beckett as the corollary, the inverse image of the perspective of “lateness” developed in the previous chapter.

3.1 “THE WESTERN PUBLIC AND ITS LANGUAGE”

The question of legibility appears in Beckett’s first published work, “Dante...Bruno.Vico.. Joyce,” an essay written at James Joyce’s behest and published initially in transition in 1929 and subsequently in the collection, Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress. Joyce organized this volume in order to garner interest in his Work in Progress (the working title for Finnegans Wake), and he assigned the young Beckett the task of demonstrating that the work’s familial and literary lineage runs through a triptych of Italians: Dante Alighieri, Giordano Bruno, and Giambattista Vico. While Beckett devotes the majority of

the essay to comparing Joyce's work to these three (Dante and Vico, especially), he also takes the opportunity to castigate the outmoded tastes of the literary public, whose lukewarm reception of Joyce's preliminary fragments provided the occasion for Beckett's essay in the first place: "Here is direct expression—pages and pages of it. And if you don't understand it, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you are too decadent to receive it."¹⁴¹ In only a few words, this caustic dressing-down pits Work in Progress's "direct expression"—a form of immanent, primitive language, as described by Vico—against the cultural decadence of the literary public, and it poses this antithesis in terms of the work's legibility: because of their jaded tastes and expectations, symptoms of a worn out civilization in decline, these Ladies and Gentlemen cannot read or comprehend Joyce's "savage economy of hieroglyphics."¹⁴² Fortunately, Beckett would eventually lose the youthful arrogance displayed here, but this passage nonetheless evinces the historical consciousness of lateness whose continued presence we have already noted in the previous chapter: "here we go again,"¹⁴³ repeating "the same old mutterings, the same old stories, the same old questions and answers,"¹⁴⁴ which have become as tired and "irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman."¹⁴⁵ In Joyce's work, Beckett finds an effort to spurn the already-domesticated and create a new primitivism—illegible to the exhausted forms that the literary public demands—that will institute a new beginning. We can already see, here, how this question of legibility illuminates an entire historical situation—a decadent civilization in need of new beginnings—as well as the role of language and literature in creating the new forms of legibility that will bring that about.

¹⁴¹ Beckett, "Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce," 26.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴³ Beckett, "Three Dialogues," *Disjecta*, 145.

¹⁴⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 78.

¹⁴⁵ Beckett, "German Letter of 1937," *Disjecta*, 171.

Such a formulation—“a decadent civilization” and “a new primitivism”—may sound grandiose today, but its key terms and concepts come from Beckett’s reading of Vico’s Scienza Nuova, whose poetics provide the foundation upon which Beckett builds his reading of Work in Progress’s literary innovation and historical significance. Beckett paraphrases Vico’s position as follows:

Poetry, he says, was born of curiosity, daughter of ignorance. The first men had to create matter by the force of their imagination, and “poet” means “creator.” Poetry was the first operation of the human mind, and without it thought could not exist. Barbarians, incapable of analysis and abstraction, must use their fantasy to explain what their reasons cannot comprehend. Before articulation comes song; before abstract terms, metaphors. The figurative character of the oldest poetry must be regarded, not as sophisticated confectionery, but as evidence of a poverty-stricken vocabulary and of a disability to achieve abstraction. Poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics...[It] follows that poetry is a prime condition of philosophy and civilization.¹⁴⁶

If “Poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics,” then the philosophy of history espoused in the Scienza Nuova is essentially the antithesis of the metaphysical philosophy of history, since, for Vico, civilizations begin with a poetic act of making—aided only by “curiosity,” “ignorance,” and a “poverty-stricken vocabulary” incapable of abstraction—not an act of knowing or understanding. The first primitive forms of expression—what Vico calls “direct expression”—had to be created by minds that had not yet built or accumulated the linguistic and intellectual means necessary to think abstractly or analyze the world categorically. As a result,

¹⁴⁶ Beckett, “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce,” 24.

this language was predominantly gestural and demonstrative (“If a man wanted to say ‘sea,’ he pointed to the sea”¹⁴⁷), and the first forms of “sacred language” or hieroglyphics retained much of those qualities: “Hieroglyphics, or sacred language, as he calls it, were not the invention of philosophers for the mysterious expression of profound thought, but the common necessity of primitive peoples.”¹⁴⁸ The pictorial character of hieroglyphics does not harbor an esoteric symbology accessible only to the initiated; it represents the immanent relation between primitive minds and their immediate material surroundings. Abstraction, philosophy, and metaphysics all follow later, but as elaborations of the primitive poetic figures that articulate the world, not as the progressive perfection of human knowledge. For that reason, History cannot have a single *telos*, a final moment of transcendence in which it comprehends itself as a totality, because it can only develop the possibilities specific to its initial poetic articulation. History is what humans make “by the force of their imagination,” and what has been made imposes limits and a necessity upon what can continue to be made: “History, then, is not the result of Fate or Chance—in both cases the individual would be separated from his product—but the result of a Necessity that is not Fate, of a Liberty that is not Chance.”¹⁴⁹ Instead of a single *telos*, Vico posits a cyclical History, where each cycle comprises the initial articulation of poetic figures that inaugurate a civilizational beginning and form institutions, the elaboration of those figures and institutions, and the eventual decline of that civilization as it finally exhausts its beginnings and gives way to new ones. History, then, does not have a single origin (any more than a single *telos*), but

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 22.

multiple beginnings.¹⁵⁰ And, since each cycle, each civilization, develops as an elaboration of the specific poetic figures that articulate its beginning, nothing guarantees continuity or legibility across cycles.

Thus, Beckett interprets Work in Progress's illegibility to the literary public as indexing a moment of civilizational transition: Joyce's achievement of a primitive, "direct expression" in literature—immanent, vital, stripped of abstraction—articulates new poetic figures, which the decadent Ladies and Gentlemen cannot read, toward a new beginning and a literary public that does not yet exist. This becomes Beckett's major point of comparison between Joyce and Dante:

[Dante] did not write in Florentine any more than in Neapolitan. He wrote a vulgar that *could* have been spoken by an ideal Italian who had assimilated what was best in all the dialects of his country, but which in fact was certainly not spoken nor ever had been. Which disposes of the capital objection that might be made against this attractive parallel between Dante and Mr. Joyce in the question of language, i.e. that at least Dante wrote what was being spoken in the streets of his own town, whereas no creature in heaven or earth ever spoke the language of Work in Progress.¹⁵¹

Just as Dante "construct[ed] a synthetic language"¹⁵² for a public that did not yet read or speak it, so Joyce creates a language that "no creature in heaven or earth ever spoke:"

It is reasonable to admit that an international phenomenon might be capable of speaking it, just as in 1300 none but an inter-regional phenomenon could have

¹⁵⁰ For example, Vico goes to great lengths, in the early chapters of the Scienza Nuova, to demonstrate that the civilizations of Ancient Greece and Rome began independently of each other, which contradicted the prevailing idea that Roman civilization was merely a continuation and further development of Greek civilization.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 30, emphasis in the original.

¹⁵² Ibid., 30.

spoken the language of the Divine Comedy. We are inclined to forget that Dante's literary public was Latin, that the form of his Poem was to be judged by Latin eyes and ears, by a Latin Esthetic intolerant of innovation.¹⁵³

Here, Beckett imagines the kinds of readers—an “international phenomenon” for Joyce, an “inter-regional phenomenon” for Dante—that each work summons, the readers that have not yet aggregated and emerged as a “public;” and in doing so, he imagines the world that each work articulates.¹⁵⁴ In Dante's case, Beckett benefits from the perspective of hindsight, of course, but he nonetheless recognizes, in Dante's creation of an Italian vernacular, the emergence of an “inter-regional” consciousness:

[Dante's] conclusion is that the corruption common to all the dialects makes it impossible to select one rather than another as an adequate literary form, and that he who would write in the vulgar must assemble the purest elements from each dialect and construct a synthetic language that would at least possess more than a circumscribed local interest: which is precisely what he did.¹⁵⁵

By eschewing both the catholicity of Church Latin and the “circumscribed local interest” of the regional dialects, Dante's Italian vernacular poetically articulates an emerging social and political aggregation—the “nation”—whose subsequent elaboration in Europe over the succeeding centuries would effect a civilizational transition from the medieval, feudal world to modern Europe. Continuing the analogy, then, the “international phenomenon” that Work in Progress summons as its prospective reader represents the emergence of another new

¹⁵³ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵⁴ See also Erich Auerbach, Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, tr. by Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon, 1965). The formulation employed here—that Dante's and Joyce's works “summon” readerships that do not yet exist or have not yet aggregated—is Auerbach's, whose reading of Dante parallels Beckett's in ways that I will explore later.

¹⁵⁵ Beckett, “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce,” 30.

aggregation, a new public beyond the nation, and a civilizational transition from modern Europe to a new internationalism and globalism that is already in progress as Beckett writes and whose effects we are only beginning to recognize and understand today.¹⁵⁶

But this new language that institutes the primitive beginnings of a new historical cycle does not come from nowhere. Neither Dante nor Joyce creates an artificial language *ex nihilo*; they each create a new vernacular. Dante's defense of vernacular literary eloquence in De Vulgari Eloquentia hinges upon distinguishing "vernacular language" from "*gramatica*," a distinction that he defines as follows: "I call 'vernacular language' that which infants acquire from those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds; or, to put it more succinctly,...that [language] which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses."¹⁵⁷ *Gramatica*—Latin being the obvious example in Dante's time—by contrast, exists "at one remove from us," and few people "achieve complete fluency in it, since knowledge of its rules and theory can only be developed through dedication to a lengthy course of study."¹⁵⁸ Dante, then, immediately asserts the greater nobility of the vernacular, "because it is natural to us, while the other is, in contrast, artificial."¹⁵⁹ Vernacular language does not come from nature, though. Dante's definition of the vernacular as the language that humans learn by imitation alludes to Aristotle's discussion of *mimesis* in the Poetics, where he asserts that the "general origin of poetry" lies in the fact that "[i]mitation [*mimesis*] is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the

¹⁵⁶ Auerbach claims that Europe, in the twentieth century, is in the midst of a transition through which it will no longer be perceptible as a distinct entity, as "it is beginning to be engulfed in another, more comprehensive unity" (Literary Language 6).

¹⁵⁷ Dante Alighieri, De Vulgari Eloquentia, Ed. and trans. by Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

world, and learns at first by imitation.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, vernacular language “is natural *to us*” in that it emerges from an activity that “is natural to man from childhood,” the activity that characterizes the species and forms the basis of poetic creation: *mimesis*. Humans make language in relation to their immediate material circumstances, by imitation, and the number and diversity of vernacular dialects attest to the historical variability of that process. Indeed, after Dante surveys the historical development of the languages and dialects of Europe, he concludes that

since humans are highly unstable and variable animals, our language can be neither durable nor consistent with itself; but, like everything else that belongs to us (such as manners and customs), it must vary according to distances of space and time...If, therefore, the speech of a given people changes, as I have said, with the passing of time, and if it can in no way remain stable, it must be the case that the speech of people who live distant and apart from each other also varies in many ways, just as do their manners and customs—which are not maintained either by nature or by association, but arise from people’s preferences and geographical proximity.¹⁶¹

Vernacular languages—like “manners and customs”—vary, develop, and change in accordance with historical, rather than natural, factors and circumstances; and, as such, they are an immanent expression of the relation between those circumstances and the mimetic processes of their articulation. Having reached this conclusion, Dante quickly reestablishes the sharp distinction between the vernacular and the *gramatica*: if the vernacular expresses a historical, human process of making that varies across time and place, then the *gramatica*, with its fixed rules and

¹⁶⁰ Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*, Trans. by W. Rhys Roberts and Ingram Bywater (New York: Modern Library, 1984), 226-227. Dante’s philosophical training in the Scholastics and his great familiarity with Aristotle are well documented and require no additional comment or justification here.

¹⁶¹ Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, 21-23.

structure, “is nothing less than a certain immutable identity of language in different times and places.”¹⁶² In other words, the *gramatica* has been removed from the processes of historical change that the vernacular expresses immanently.¹⁶³

Dante’s defense of vulgar eloquence in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and his creation of an Italian vernacular in the *Commedia*, then, mark an effort to produce a new literature grounded mimetically in the dynamic materiality of human historicity, which the Latin *gramatica*—immutable across time and space, impervious to change—cannot represent. Dante’s primitivism, in Vico’s sense, lies precisely in his repudiation of Latin, with its aspirations to universality, and his articulation of a language whose form of expression indexes its historical and material conditions (specifically, the emergence of an inter-regional or national consciousness in the early 14th century) immanently; and we have already seen that this immanent relation between language and the world characterizes the “direct expression” that articulates the primitive beginnings of civilizations, according to Vico. Indeed, this immanent relation is lost only as civilizations and their languages achieve a higher degree of sophistication:

Convenience only begins to assert itself at a far more advanced stage of civilization, in the form of alphabetism. Here Vico, implicitly at least, distinguishes between writing and direct expression. In such direct expression, form and content are inseparable.¹⁶⁴

The elaboration of language to the point at which its form and content become separable—the former becoming merely the vehicle for the latter—implies a level of abstraction that

¹⁶² Ibid, 23.

¹⁶³ Auerbach argues, in *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, that the Carolingians’ restoration of “correct” Latin as a learned and liturgical language “definitively cut the already feeble ties of intelligibility between Latin and the vernacular languages” (265) and removed Latin from the vicissitudes of everyday life and historical change.

¹⁶⁴ Beckett, “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce,” 25.

civilizations only reach at a late stage. At a certain point, this abstraction becomes a symptom of decadence, as language detaches itself—like the Latin *gramatica*—from the immanence of historical change and loses its sensitivity for the flux and the materiality of the everyday.

Achieving a new literary primitivism, in Viconian terms, then, does not entail an idealist creation *ex nihilo*;¹⁶⁵ nor does it entail “regression” to or nostalgia for a barbaric or romanticized past, since Vico’s cyclical understanding of history means that the primitive beginnings of civilizations do not reside only in the past.¹⁶⁶ It means excising, tearing apart—“word-storming”—or otherwise circumventing this abstraction that separates form from content and developing a new form of expression that indexes its historicity immanently, a language with all the vigor and gestural vitality of “direct expression.” Joyce achieves precisely this, Beckett claims: “Mr. Joyce has desophisticated language. And it is worth while remarking that no language is so sophisticated as English. It is abstracted to death.”¹⁶⁷ Just as Dante created a literary vernacular that would be sensitive to the diversity and variability of human historicity in ways that the Latin *gramatica* could not, so Joyce tries to desophisticate English, whose abstraction “to death” marks its decadence, in order to reach a language that expresses immanently its material conditions and the vicissitudes of historical change:

This writing that you find so obscure is a quintessential extraction of language
and painting and gesture, with all the inevitable clarity of the old inarticulation.

¹⁶⁵ Beckett begins his discussion of Vico, in fact, by explicitly rejecting Benedetto Croce’s then-authoritative interpretation of Vico as a “mystic” and an idealist: “[Vico’s] treatment of the origin and functions of poetry, language and myth, as will appear later, is as far removed from the mystical as it is possible to imagine” (20).

¹⁶⁶ See Massimo Verdicchio, “Exagmination Round the Fictification of Vico and Joyce” *James Joyce Quarterly* 26.4 (Summer 1989): 531-539. Verdicchio’s essay is one of the more thorough and sustained studies of “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce,” but his failure to account for the cyclical character of Vico’s history leads him to misread Vico’s “primitive” as “regressive” and even “debased” (536). Thus, Beckett’s comparison of Joyce with Vico, Verdicchio erroneously argues, is “[n]ot a flattering analogy” (536). John Pilling’s reading of “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce” in *Beckett Before Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) follows Verdicchio’s misreading in this matter.

¹⁶⁷ Beckett, “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce,” 28.

Here is the savage economy of hieroglyphics. Here words are not the polite contortions of 20th century printer's ink. They are alive. They elbow their way on to the page, and glow and blaze and fade and disappear.¹⁶⁸

The words themselves do more than transparently convey the meaning that has been entrusted to them. Here, meaning and the means of its conveyance cannot be differentiated. The words gesture, perform, dance, “elbow their way on to the page, and glow and blaze and fade and disappear,” at one with the story:

Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read—or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*.¹⁶⁹

The decadent Ladies and Gentlemen complain that “this stuff is not written in English,” with its familiar abstractions that keep form and content neatly separated; but here, Beckett suggests, in this “quintessential extraction of language and painting and gesture” that savagely tears apart that abstraction, we may hear the first primitive utterances expressing the emergence of a new reader, a new public, and a new beginning.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 28.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 27, emphasis in the original. Pascale Casanova reads this passage—especially the “form *is* content, content *is* form” line—as expressing a desire for abstraction, which is achieved when the work finally strips itself of “content” or “meaning” and reduces itself to “form.” Beckett’s essay clearly presents abstraction as a form of decadence, however. The production of a literature in which form and content are inseparable does not yield an abstraction that *ends* meaning; it yields a primitivism that *inaugurates* new meanings.

3.2 READING “EUROPE” THROUGH DANTE

I have already indicated that Beckett wrote “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce” as an occasional piece, a critical work composed at Joyce’s behest and for Joyce’s benefit. While this might provide grounds for skepticism regarding the work’s significance, we should not be too quick to dismiss this essay as a mere advertisement produced as a personal favor for a friend and mentor. We’ve seen how “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce” evinces the sense of civilizational decadence and historical belatedness that pervades the entire *oeuvre*, such that we cannot avoid reading the essay as an integral, if early, moment within that *oeuvre*; and certainly, Beckett’s own obsession with Dante proved to be lifelong, hardly the passing interest of one who is merely completing an assignment. More importantly, though, we cannot ignore the literary-historical milieu within which the essay emerged. Writing about Joyce and especially Dante between the wars meant joining an ongoing critical dialogue about the future of European civilization, and Vico’s central position within the essay foregrounds the civilizational question from the very beginning. By this point, T.S. Eliot had already lauded the mythic form and structure of Ulysses as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history,”¹⁷⁰ thereby reading Joyce’s literary innovation as a response to a perceived historical crisis. What’s more, Eliot’s monograph on Dante—published in 1929, the same year that “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce” appeared in transition¹⁷¹—reads the poet as the highest expression of the unity of the mind of medieval Europe, the apex of Western civilization, which has been declining towards the present crisis ever since; Eliot thus interprets

¹⁷⁰ T.S. Eliot, “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” The Dial 75.5 (November 1923): 483.

¹⁷¹ “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce” appeared again that same year in Our Exagmination, which was soon republished by Faber and Faber, whose literary advisor was Eliot. See Ackerley and Gontarski, The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett, 190.

Dante, as well, in a way that illuminates and reflects upon this crisis. Erich Auerbach (whose Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt also appeared in 1929), E.R. Curtius, Antonio Gramsci, and others had already contributed or would contribute to this conversation by the end of the Second World War, thereby producing a robust and vital critical discourse on Dante and the crisis of twentieth century Europe within which we must read Beckett's essay. Yet, the majority of the extant scholarship on Beckett and Dante has focused overwhelmingly on questions of personal "influence" and "authority" to the almost complete exclusion of the historical and civilizational questions that permeate Beckett's essay.¹⁷² This blind spot in the criticism may be attributable, in part, to the relative lack of attention that has been given to the centrality of Vico's poetics and cyclical understanding of history in the essay, without which the comparison of Joyce with Dante

¹⁷² See especially Walter A. Strauss, "Dante's Belacqua and Beckett's Tramps," Comparative Literature 11.3 (Summer 1959): 250-261; Ruby Cohn, "A Note on Beckett, Dante, and Geulincx," Comparative Literature 12.1 (Winter 1960): 93-94; John Fletcher, "Beckett's Debt to Dante," Nottingham French Studies 4.1 (1965): 41-52; A.J. Leventhal, "The Beckett Hero," Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965); Michael Robinson, The Long Sonata of the Dead (New York: Grove Press, 1970); Neal Oxenhandler, "Seeing and Believing in Dante and Beckett," Writing in a Modern Temper: Essays on French Literature and Thought in Honor of Henri Peyre, ed. by Mary Ann Caws (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri, 1984); Wallace Fowlie, "Dante and Beckett," Dante Among the Moderns, ed. by Stuart Y. McDougal (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1985); Sighle Kennedy, "Beckett's 'Schoolboy Copy' of Dante: A Handbook for Liberty," Dalhousie French Studies 19 (1990): 11-19; Mary Bryden, "Beckett and the Three Dantean Smiles," Journal of Beckett Studies 4.2 (Spring 1995): 29-33; Kelly Anspaugh, "'Faith, Hope, and—What Was It?': Beckett Reading Joyce Reading Dante," Journal of Beckett Studies 5.1-2 (Autumn 1995-Spring 1996): 19-38; Jean-Pierre Ferrini, Dante et Beckett (Paris: Hermann, 2003); and Daniela Casseli, Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2005).

The question of "influence"—how Dante influenced Beckett and how Beckett incorporates and/or subverts that influence—has taken on a variety of forms in the scholarship on Beckett and Dante over the past few decades. Strauss, Cohn, Fletcher, Oxenhandler, and Ferrini all catalog Dantean allusions in Beckett as a measure of the former's influence; Ferrini's book-length study provides the most exhaustive catalog to date. Strauss, Leventhal, Robinson, Kennedy, and Ferrini all follow the course of the Belacqua figure and argue that Beckett's subsequent protagonists stem from that figure. Fletcher and Ferrini argue that Beckett develops a "negative theology" in opposition to Dante, thereby providing a different twist on the question of influence. Anspaugh reads a "filial" and "master/pupil" lineage from Dante to Joyce to Beckett, in which the pupils' readings of the masters—whether it's Joyce reading Dante, Beckett reading Joyce, or Beckett reading Dante *through* Joyce—always simultaneously repeat and subvert the master. Casseli's recent study provides a more innovative reading of Beckett/Dante "intertexts" that tries to dispense with the question of influence by demonstrating the construction of authorship and, thus, destabilizing the master/pupil and origin/allusion relations.

Pascale Casanova's Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution, trans. by Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2006) breaks this mold by taking up the historical implications of Beckett's interest in Dante, but she restricts her argument to literary politics in Ireland, leaving the broader European questions untouched.

“reduces itself,” as John Fletcher says, “to a few incidental quotations and the not very original assertion that Dante was a linguistic innovator much like Joyce.”¹⁷³ Such platitudes might be applied to any great literary master, and Beckett’s likening of Joyce to Dante would appear to be little more than this, if we remove the comparison from the context of Vico’s historical cycles of beginnings and decadence. The civilizational questions that Beckett’s reading of Vico foregrounds and the way that these questions color the subsequent readings of Dante and Joyce within the essay have mostly escaped comment.¹⁷⁴ I will stress these points in what follows, as I resituate Beckett’s reading of Dante amid the critical discourse on Dante and the crisis of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century.

Eliot’s Dante presents this crisis as the culmination of a slow “process of disintegration”¹⁷⁵ through which European culture, once unified by the immutable catholicity of Church Latin, has become increasingly illegible to its various constituents. Eliot attributes this fragmentation of Europe to the rise of nationalism and the concomitant development of national vernaculars, which he calls “modern languages:”

When you read modern philosophy, in English, French, German, and Italian, you must be struck by national or racial differences of thought: modern languages *tend*

¹⁷³ Fletcher, “Beckett’s Debt to Dante,” 41. Ackerley and Gontarski’s Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett—which also mentions Vico only briefly—likewise states that Beckett’s comparison of Joyce and Dante “is based on linguistic innovation, an assemblage of ‘the purest elements from each dialect,’ and a ‘synthetic language’” (123), without commenting on the historical situation or significance of their respective innovations.

¹⁷⁴ Serious readings of the significance of Vico in Beckett’s essay remain few and far between. See Verdicchio, “Examination Round the Fictification of Vico and Joyce;” Pilling, Beckett Before Godot; Eva Doran, “Au seuil de Beckett: Quelques notes sur ‘Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce,’” Stanford French Review 5.1 (Spring 1981): 121-127; and Sighle Kennedy, Murphy’s Bed: A Study of Real Sources and Sur-real Associations in Samuel Beckett’s First Novel (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1971). Verdicchio and Pilling focus largely on determining how much of Beckett’s reading of Vico comes from secondary sources; they, ultimately, don’t take Vico’s presence in the essay very seriously, as they indicate that Beckett’s reading was largely borrowed from other sources. Doran and Kennedy treat Vico as a significant figure in Beckett’s works, but they do so by trying to extract from Vico a theoretical framework that will comprehend the *oeuvre*. Doran, for example, tries to “apply” Vico’s cyclical conception of history to Beckett’s works, which yields for her the “equation,” “existence humaine=cercle vicieux” (125). She treats this insight as the interpretive key that unlocks the entire *oeuvre*.

¹⁷⁵ Eliot, Dante, 202.

to separate abstract thought (mathematics is now the only universal language); but medieval Latin tended to concentrate on what men of various races and lands could think together.¹⁷⁶

Somewhat counter-intuitively, Eliot's nostalgia for what he imagines here as the cooperative unity of the culture of medieval Europe under universal Latin attaches itself to Dante's Commedia, a work of vernacular language verse. Eliot brushes this difficulty aside, however, arguing that the proximity of Dante's Italian to Latin, his literary and philosophical formation in Latin, and his use of allegory (which was "a universal European method"¹⁷⁷) counteract the tendency towards national specificity that characterizes most modern language poetry:

[In English poetry,] words have associations, and the groups of words *in* association have associations, which is a kind of local self-consciousness, because they are the growth of a *particular* civilization; and the same thing is true of other modern languages. The Italian of Dante, though essentially the Italian of today, is not in this way a modern language. The culture of Dante was not of one European country but of Europe.¹⁷⁸

Dante's Italian expresses not the "local self-consciousness" of a nation, but the cultural and intellectual unity of Europe as a whole. Put differently, "The language of each great English poet is his own language; the language of Dante is the perfection of a common language,"¹⁷⁹ his stated intentions in De Vulgari Eloquentia notwithstanding. Eliot thus feels justified in calling Dante "the most *universal* of poets in the modern languages."¹⁸⁰ This universality manifests

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 201, emphasis in the original.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 205.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 201, emphasis in the original.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 213.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 200, emphasis in the original.

itself, for Eliot, in the ease with which any European—even one not well versed in the Italian language—can read the Commedia:

Dante is “easier to read,” for a foreigner who does not know Italian very well, for other reasons: but all related to this central reason, that in Dante’s time Europe, with all its dissensions and dirtiness, was mentally more united than we can now conceive. It is not particularly the Treaty of Versailles that has separated nation from nation; nationalism was born long before; and the process of disintegration which for our generation culminates in that treaty began soon after Dante’s time.¹⁸¹

Dante’s near-universal legibility, as Eliot would have it, across Europe indexes the unity and cooperative creative power of a civilization at the peak of its strength, and the disintegration of that legibility marks the slow decline of that civilization towards the crisis of the early twentieth century.

E.R. Curtius’ monumental European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages echoes Eliot’s alarm—it too “grew out of a concern for the preservation of Western culture,” whose unity has nearly been lost in “the intellectual chaos of the present”¹⁸²—though Curtius takes a far more rigorous scholarly approach. Rather than decrying Europe’s fall from the heights of an overly romanticized medieval past, Curtius seeks to continue the “cultivation of the European tradition”¹⁸³ by demonstrating its continuity from the ancient world to the modern era and by uncovering the mechanisms that create and sustain that continuity. His work focuses on the Latin literature of the Middle Ages, then, in order to fill in a chronological gap in the study of

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 202.

¹⁸² Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), viii.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 16.

European literary history and present the Middle Ages not as a rupture or interruption between the ancient and modern worlds, but as a transition that maintains a seamless continuity between the two. This continuity is most readily evident in the Latin literature of the period, since its language preserves cultural forms from Antiquity and transmits them to the Latin-derived Romance vernacular literatures of the late Middle Ages and beyond. “What is fundamental,” for Curtius, throughout, “is the concept that the substance of antique culture was never destroyed,”¹⁸⁴ but that it has been preserved and transmitted through the Latin language and its derivatives, such that Latinity forms the underlying, unifying substratum that makes the entire European tradition perceptible as a single, “intelligible unit.”¹⁸⁵ He equates the entire tradition with “Romania,” that is, the peoples and cultures rooted in Romance languages (“The Romance literatures hold the lead in the West from the Crusades to the French Revolution, one succeeding another. Only from within Romania does one obtain a true picture of the course of modern literature.”¹⁸⁶), and he even goes so far as to claim England’s Latinity and to make a place for twentieth century English literature within Romania, or the European tradition.¹⁸⁷

Curtius finds the mechanism by which the culture of Antiquity has been preserved and transmitted throughout Romania in the *topoi*, or “topics,” of antique rhetoric. In the context of political or judicial oratory, the *topoi* are a set of commonplaces that can be used to build arguments; they are “intellectual themes, suitable for development and modification at the

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁸⁷ T.S. Eliot had been arguing for the Latinity of English literature for decades, by this point, and Curtius quotes a passage from Eliot’s *Criterion* (Oct., 1923) approvingly in this matter: “Three or four great novelists do not make a literature, though *War and Peace* is a very great novel indeed. If everything derived from Rome were withdrawn—everything we have from Norman-French society, from the Church, from Humanism, from every channel direct and indirect, what would be left? A few Teutonic roots and husks. England is a ‘Latin’ country, and we ought not to have to go to France for our Latinity” (35). For a more indepth discussion of the intellectual affinities and generally amicable correspondence between Curtius and Eliot, see Claus Uhlig, “Tradition in Curtius and Eliot,” *Comparative Literature* 42.3 (Summer 1990): 193-207.

orator's pleasure;" they are, "as Quintilian... says, 'storehouses of trains of thought' ('argumentorum sedes'), and thus can serve a practical purpose."¹⁸⁸ With the advent of the Empire and the concomitant reduction of opportunities for political oratory before a public assembly, rhetoric loses its social function and consequently permeates other disciplines, literature especially, in order to survive; as a result, the *topoi* also "acquire a new function. They become clichés, which can be used in any form of literature, they spread to all spheres of life with which literature deals and to which it gives form."¹⁸⁹ Curtius shows that these *topoi* populate not only the Latin literature of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, but all of the vernacular literatures of Romania as well, such that the continued deployment of the *topoi*, their reiteration and elaboration in new contexts and languages, effects the continued transmission of the ancient world into the present and ensures that the tradition remains legible to itself, regardless of changes to specific languages over time; one can always find a recognizable *topos*, even when separated by vast distances of space and time from the work at hand. The *topoi*, Curtius argues, thus become the means through which the tradition may be read and understood from any point within itself.

Not even Dante's linguistic innovation disrupts that legibility. The Dante that Curtius painstakingly presents is a "traditional" poet, in the sense described above: far from the inventor of new modes of legibility that Beckett describes in "Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce," Curtius' Dante fills his poetry with figures and elements that anyone familiar with the tradition could recognize. Indeed, Curtius goes to great lengths to demonstrate that metaphors in the Commedia that prior critics had erroneously attributed to the influence of specific sources or poets were, in fact, traditional metaphors derived from the *topoi*. Of De Vulgari Eloquentia, Curtius only

¹⁸⁸ Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, 70.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 70.

comments, “Dante’s treatise on vernacular poetry bears the title De Vulgari Eloquentia. About 1300, then, it is still normal to conceive of poetry as a species of eloquence.”¹⁹⁰ Even in the treatise in which Dante purports to break from the tradition, Curtius finds evidence of the continued commingling of poetics and rhetoric through which the *topoi* permeate literature and ensure its continuity and legibility. Curtius’ Dante, then, like Eliot’s, is certainly a great and innovative literary master, but he is that precisely because he sustains and enhances the tradition.

The unity and cohesion of the tradition only come under attack, according to Curtius, near the end of the 18th century, in what he calls the “Age of Goethe,”¹⁹¹ as the ascendancy of German literature and Romanticism introduces individual “experience” as a basis for poetic creation, in opposition to the elaboration of the *topoi*. The modern critic, formed by Romantic poetry and its interpretation, loses interest in “traditional” poetry that takes its themes—“spring or nightingales or swallows,”¹⁹² for example—from antique rhetoric and elaborates the tradition, preferring instead poetry whose themes are individual and distinct from the tradition. The substitution in modern literature of “experience” for the *topoi* thus produces a crisis of legibility that disintegrates the unity of the tradition and yields the “intellectual chaos of the present.” Curtius’ claim that, after exploring its Germanic roots in the 19th century, English literature (led by T.S. Eliot) turned back towards its Latinity in the early twentieth century is clearly aimed at reestablishing the predominance of Romania and its literatures, reintroducing the mechanisms by which the tradition remains legible to itself as a coherent and continuous unity, and thereby saving Western civilization from falling into illegibility.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 145.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 34. The Age of Goethe and the ascendancy of Germanic literatures coincides with what Curtius calls the “Period of Technique” (23), the rise of industrialism that characterizes, for Curtius, the modern period and sets it in opposition to the Middle Ages and Antiquity.

¹⁹² Ibid., 158.

Erich Auerbach responds to Europe's crisis of legibility in the twentieth century with considerably less alarm, in part because, as he shows in Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, such crises have happened before, specifically in the early Middle Ages. The Latin literature of the period may have, as Curtius argues, *preserved* much of antique culture and prevented it from being consigned to oblivion, but there was, Auerbach retorts, no literary public to read, cultivate, or elaborate it.¹⁹³ Auerbach, in fact, describes the early Middle Ages not as a transitional period that links Antiquity to the present and allows us to perceive "Europe" as an "intelligible unit," but as "the great hiatus, the period in which there is no literary public and no generally intelligible literary language."¹⁹⁴ The culture of Antiquity at the height of the Empire, Auerbach shows, was characterized by the presence of a sizable minority of educated persons, usually belonging to a higher social class, who engaged in literary activity both as a form of cultivated recreation and as a way of participating in the social and intellectual life of the Empire. Auerbach calls this group the "literary public"—"in contrast on the one hand to the great mass of the uneducated and on the other hand to those who made literature and learning their profession"¹⁹⁵—and he claims that they shared a common, "literary language," the existence of which "is the constituent prerequisite for the formation of the social class that we have called the public and, it goes without saying, for the creation of a literature that requires such a public."¹⁹⁶ This literary language of late Antiquity remained rooted in the language of everyday life—"a literary language becomes an artificial or technical language as

¹⁹³ Erich Auerbach, Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Auerbach's study of the Middle Ages in this work not only supplements his own Mimesis, but it also directly challenges Curtius' influential work: "I have drawn considerable material and also the formulation of certain problems from Ernst Robert Curtius' imposing work on the Middle Ages, although I seldom agree with his judgment as to what is significant and what is not" (24). I will elaborate the contrast between these two more fully in what follows.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

soon as it ceases to take in material from the spoken tongue”¹⁹⁷—though it was considerably more conservative, changing more often through deliberate cultivation than by mere happenstance. The existence and elaboration of this common language sustained the public and its literature and produced a continuous legibility throughout the culture of late Antiquity, which only began to dwindle towards the end of the Empire. The absence of such a language—and thus, a literary public—in the early Middle Ages defines the “essential structural difference” between that period and Antiquity:

[A] time had dawned and would long endure when the leading classes of society possessed neither education nor books nor even a language in which they could have expressed a culture rooted in their actual living conditions. There was a learned language, and there were spoken languages that could not be written; there was no language of general culture.¹⁹⁸

The Carolingians’ restoration of “correct” Latin and its curriculum preserved much of the tradition of Antiquity, Auerbach concedes, but it also “definitively cut the already feeble ties of intelligibility between Latin and the vernacular languages”¹⁹⁹—which had strayed far from their Latin source by this point—thereby decisively separating the language of scholarship and learning from the elaboration of culture grounded in the materiality of everyday life. Here, we see the continuity of the culture of Europe broken: even though the materials of the tradition were not destroyed, there existed no literary language that could ground a public capable of elaborating and continuing the culture of Antiquity.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 249. Auerbach’s point resonates clearly with Dante’s distinction between “vernacular” and “*grammatica*” here.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 255.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 265.

This rupture in legibility, however, allowed the Romance literatures to develop *independently* in the late Middle Ages; in this development, Auerbach detects “the beginnings of a modern public.”²⁰⁰ Speaking, in this way, of the modern public’s “beginnings” implies a mode of relation between the modern and what came before it: a relation not of seamless, linear continuity, as Curtius would have it, the past transmitted down a continuous line of succession into the present, but rather a relation of what Edward W. Said (a great reader both of Auerbach and—like Auerbach himself—of Vico) would call “adjacency,” wherein what has just begun stands *next to* what came before, related somehow (as there is no creation *ex nihilo*), yet intentionally differentiating itself. “Beginnings,” Said writes,

inaugurate a deliberately *other* production of meaning—a gentile (as opposed to a sacred) one. It is “other” because, in writing, this gentile production claims a status *alongside* other works; it is *another* work, rather than one in a line of descent from X or Y. Beginnings, as I treat them, intend this difference, they are its first instance: they make a way along the road.²⁰¹

Dante’s Commedia intends such a difference and “[inaugurates] a deliberately *other* production of meaning” in the late Middle Ages not only by creating an Italian vernacular that purposefully differentiates itself from both Church Latin (which difference he defends in De Vulgari Eloquentia) and the regional dialects of the Italian peninsula, but by summoning, Auerbach argues, a new literary public:

Dante created a public not for himself alone but for his successors as well. He molded, as potential readers of his poem, a community which was scarcely in

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 294.

²⁰¹ Edward W. Said, Beginnings: Intention and Method (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985): 13, emphasis in the original. Said’s debt to Vico, which he addresses explicitly in the book’s final chapter, is evident even in his word choice, e.g., “gentile” for “secular.”

existence at the time when he wrote and which was gradually built up *by* his poem and by the poets who came after him.²⁰²

Dante does not merely solicit an audience *for* his poem; he cultivates a public *through* it. Auerbach examines Dante's numerous apostrophes to the Reader in the Commedia, and he finds Dante inviting his readers into the scene, directing their attention towards specific aspects of it, and guiding them towards the correct interpretation of the spectacle before them as it relates to the Divine Plan and the Divine Judgment, all in a vernacular language that the Church did not control, that any educated Italian could learn and cultivate, and that thus grounded the formation of a literary public in Italy, as distinct from the scholars and clerics who read only Latin. Far from sustaining the continuous legibility of a universal European culture from Antiquity, Auerbach's Dante, like Beckett's, articulates new forms of legibility that inaugurate a new public and a new beginning.

At this point, we can begin to see more clearly the contrasting images of Europe that emerge within the critical discourse on Dante and the tradition in the first half of the twentieth century. On one side, Eliot and especially Curtius propose a unified Europe, a single, continuous civilization, the essence of whose continuity has been present all along in an underlying substratum of Latinity that takes on specific historical forms (according to Curtius, at least) through the elaboration of the *topoi* but always remains legible to itself. The disintegration of that legibility by the early twentieth century and the end of the continuity of European culture thus appeared to Eliot and Curtius as a near-apocalypse, the catastrophic destruction of European civilization since Antiquity. On the other side, Beckett and Auerbach see only the latest iteration in a cycle of beginnings and decadence, such that the crisis of legibility in the first half of the

²⁰² Auerbach, Literary Language and Its Public, 312, emphasis added.

twentieth century marks not a cataclysmic endpoint, but a moment of civilizational transition in which new beginnings, new modes of legibility, and a new public may be perceived, adjacent to what came before. “European civilization,” Auerbach writes, “is approaching the term of its existence; its history as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, for already it is beginning to be engulfed in another, more comprehensive unity.”²⁰³ The end of Europe’s history is not catastrophic, for Auerbach, in part, because he can already perceive a “more comprehensive unity”—whose public might include the “international phenomenon” that Beckett imagines—emerging in Europe’s wake. More than that, “Europe,” Auerbach implies, will soon appear to have been only one subject among many within a larger historical drama, for it is only Europe’s history “*as a distinct entity*” that is ending; presumably, its role—if one can still speak of that “role” as singular—within the history of the “more comprehensive unity” cannot yet be deciphered. Auerbach thus finds himself at a moment of transition that provides him a fleeting glimpse of “Europe” in the moment of its extinction “as a distinct entity,” as the primary and singular subject of the historical drama that terminates in the present; indeed, he says that elaborating the image of “Europe” is “a task specific to our time—a task which could not have been envisaged yesterday and will no longer be conceivable tomorrow.”²⁰⁴ In the moment of its extinction, its obsolescence, this subject can only be pieced together and interpreted vestigially, by its vestiges, its detritus, by forms of intelligibility that no longer communicate or have outlasted their use.

²⁰³ Ibid., 6.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 6.

3.3 “SYNTAXES UPEDED”

Beckett, unlike Eliot, would never develop a theory of culture; but then, he never developed a systematic critical practice either. This difference in the way that they fashioned their lives and careers as men of letters accounts, at least in part, for the differing images of Europe that we find in their respective works. Whereas Eliot’s longstanding effort to define and cultivate a coherent European literary culture and tradition took the form of numerous critical essays and years of dedicated, purposeful editorial work on The Criterion, Beckett’s collected critical output bears the title, Disjecta,²⁰⁵ and it accordingly comprises a comparatively scant array of scattered miscellany, of which “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce” is the first. Whereas Eliot sought to ground the coherence of the tradition in the stable legibility of Latinity, Beckett presents an image of “tattered syntaxes of Jolly and Draeger Praeger Draeger”²⁰⁶—the latter alluding irreverently to Anton August Draeger’s Historiche Syntax der lateinischen Sprache²⁰⁷—and soon imagines these “syntaxes upended in opposite corners,”²⁰⁸ cast off, their predominance overthrown, their legibility disrupted. Whereas Eliot championed the unity and continuity of a literary language upon which a culture could be built, Beckett envisions that language—along with its institutional means of standardization and transmission—in ruins, the last lingering remnants of a decadent literary culture and its public.

The fragmentary and residual nature of this vision—operating without the support of a mythology or philosophical system—prevents it, however, from coalescing into a prophecy of

²⁰⁵ The title is Beckett’s own, even though he agreed only reluctantly to having these pieces collected and published. Included in this volume is a review of Rilke’s poetry written for and published in Eliot’s Criterion in 1934.

²⁰⁶ Samuel Beckett, All Strange Away, The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989, ed. by S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 169.

²⁰⁷ Grove Companion, 149.

²⁰⁸ Beckett, All Strange Away, 171.

apocalypse. We saw in the preceding chapter that Watt's discarded hypotheses and unassimilated Addenda yield an open-ended, abortive work that resists closure or culmination at the level of form. All Strange Away, the short fiction that imagines these “syntaxes upended,” is more literally a disjectum, part of a series of residua stemming from an abandoned work, Fancy Dying, and finally yielding Imagination morte imaginez. This is not to say that these fragmentary pieces—which include four “Faux Départs,” three in French, one in English, published in June 1965²⁰⁹—form a linear series that *culminates* in Imagination morte imaginez's publication only a few months later (nor its almost immediately published English translation, Imagination Dead Imagine), for All Strange Away itself wasn't published until more than a decade later, in 1976, despite having been written in 1964. Even if All Strange Away represents an earlier moment in the writing process, a moment “on the way” to Imagination Dead Imagine, its later publication unsettles Imagination Dead Imagine's status as the “final” or “authoritative” version of the work; it reintroduces, after the fact, elements that Imagination Dead Imagine seemed to have already dispensed with. Taken together, All Strange Away, Imagination Dead Imagine, and the “Faux Départs” form not a cohesive *oeuvre*, much less a sequence of drafts leading inexorably toward the final refinement and polish of a single, finished work, but a scattered collection of detritus and residual fragments tending more towards dispersion than culmination.²¹⁰ All Strange Away's “tattered syntaxes,” for example, appear variously as “les

²⁰⁹ Samuel Beckett, “Faux Départs,” Kurbusch 1 (June 1965): 1-5. Reprinted in The Complete Short Prose. The English fragment corresponds to the opening of All Strange Away.

²¹⁰ See Leslie Hill, “Reading Beckett's Reminders,” French Studies 38.2 (April 1984): 173-187. Hill shows that the two predominant readings of Beckett's short prose—that it employs an art of minimalism that strips away language to leave the reader face to face with the essential void of human existence, and that it employs an art of minimalism that refines or distills Beckett's message and provides its “quintessential expression” (173)—are both animated by the same “finalist assumptions,” which are grounded in a “myth of cultural apocalypse” (174). Hill argues, in contrast, that the short prose enacts a continuing process of fragmentation and dispersion, of “repetition and difference” (174), but his thesis—“What Beckett's residues display is this principle of radical fragmentation

Syntaxes de Jolly et de Draeger,” “les Lexiques de Jolly et de Draeger,” and “tattered syntaxes of Jolly and Draeger Praeger Draeger”²¹¹ in the first, second, and fourth “Faux Départs,” respectively, but they are absent from the third fragment, as well as from Imagination Dead Imagine. This should not indicate that, by the time Beckett produces Imagination Dead Imagine, the question of a standardized literary language and its culture has been destroyed or refined out of the work; on the contrary, the syntaxes’ intermittent disappearance and reappearance across more than a decade and two languages²¹² suggest that, even in their ostensible absence, the syntaxes linger transiently in the margins as a vestigial trace of an obsolete literary language and culture that the works nevertheless cannot eradicate entirely. The image of “syntaxes upended” does not finally prove apocalyptic, then, as it remains suspended between the drive towards erasure and the impossibility of its achievement across a series of residua that never achieve culmination or even an authoritative form.

This unresolved tension between the relentless effort to destroy the language that grounds a literary culture and the inevitable failure of that effort characterizes the *ethos* of the fidelity to failure discussed in the preceding chapter, and it forms the theme of “Enough,” one of the four pieces collected and published in a trilingual edition under the title Residua in 1970.²¹³ This particular residue takes the form of a first person monologue, a rarity among Beckett’s short prose from the ‘60s, and its themes and images resonate with and respond to Eliot’s elegiac

pursued to its logical end of dispersion and multiplicity” (175)—ultimately deploys the “myth of cultural apocalypse” in its own way, as “dispersion and multiplicity” become ends in themselves.

What’s more, the residual, fragmented short fiction of the ‘60s and ‘70s reveals the “finalist assumptions” of genetic criticism, which examines the writing process—as evidenced in manuscripts and other archival material—in order to make empirically based interpretive claims about the final work. This brand of criticism presumes a teleological relation among drafts, a relation that does not hold in the case of Beckett’s short fiction. See Dirk Van Hulle, “Introduction: Genetic Beckett Studies,” Journal of Beckett Studies 13.2 (Spring 2004): 1-9.

²¹¹ Beckett, “Faux Départs,” The Complete Short Prose, 271-272.

²¹² Three languages, actually, considering that the “Faux Départs” were first published in a German journal together with German translations by Elmar Tophoven.

²¹³ The other three pieces in the collection are Imagination Dead Imagine, “Ping,” and Lessness.

poem, “Gerontion.” Where Eliot’s monologist, however, is the old man of the poem’s title—a figure of Europe in decay, whose memory extends from the “hot gates” of the Battle of Thermopylae in the fifth century B.C.E. to the trench battles “in the warm rain / ...knee deep in the salt marsh”²¹⁴ of the recently concluded Great War—Beckett’s is another, apparently a woman,²¹⁵ who attends the old man until he tells her to leave. Up until that point, she submitted to his desires completely, such that they were also her desires:

I only had the desires he manifested. But he must have manifested them all. All his desires and needs. When he was silent he must have been like me. When he told me to lick his penis I hastened to do so. I drew satisfaction from it. We must have had the same satisfactions. The same needs and the same satisfactions.²¹⁶

She submitted to and internalized his language, as well: “I never asked myself the question. I never asked myself any questions but his.”²¹⁷ She walked for miles at his elbow and listened to his murmuring:

As soon as out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed my head alongside his the murmurs came. Nine times out of ten they did not concern me. But he wished everything to be heard including the ejaculations and broken paternosters that he poured out to the flowers at his feet.²¹⁸

Here, desire and language become one, as the old man spills his language/seed on the ground— together with the “broken paternosters,” vestiges of the language and the liturgy that once united

²¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, “Gerontion,” *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, ed. by Frank Kermode (New York: Penguin, 1998), 31.

²¹⁵ The narrator’s sex is not certain, though the reference to his or her “old breasts” in the final sentence allows one to make a reasonable assumption. All of the sex acts described in “Enough” would be sterile anyway, regardless of the narrator’s sex; so, from a reproductive standpoint—which I will argue is of central importance to the work—it doesn’t really matter whether the narrator is a man or a woman.

²¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, “Enough,” *The Complete Short Prose*, 186.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

the medieval “mind of Europe,” for Eliot—in an act of barren onanism devoid of reproductive potential. He too, as in Eliot, is “an old man in a dry month,”²¹⁹ a figure of sterility, both sexual and cultural, in sterile times. But “Gerontion” cannot proceed beyond the old man’s sterility and, by extension, Europe’s degeneration and decline: “Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season,”²²⁰ the poem concludes. Instead of reproduction, we find the Jew landlord “Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp, / Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London”²²¹ and the “Unnatural vices” that are “fathered by our heroism,”²²² both images of the corruption of Europe and its generative processes.²²³ For the old man, the “I” of Eliot’s poem, there can be no going on past the sterility of the present, only catastrophe. In “Enough,” by contrast, there may be no reproduction, only sex acts without issue (fellatio, onanism), but the “I” continues beyond the old man’s sterile decay, even if this continuation takes the form of being cast off and beginning is figured not as regeneration, but as “disgrace.”²²⁴ In fact, the work occupies itself with trying to imagine going on after the old man, with trying to *narrate* going on without his language and desires. “All that goes before forget,”²²⁵ it starts, clearing the ground for a new beginning. But every time the woman narrates being told to leave, she immediately takes two steps forward and, finding that she can proceed no further in the story, recounts more from her past life with the old man, until she arrives once again at the point of departure and disgrace:

Too much at a time is too much. That gives the pen time to note. I don’t see it
but I hear it there behind me. Such is the silence. When the pen stops I go on.

²¹⁹ Eliot, “Gerontion,” 31.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²²² *Ibid.*, 32.

²²³ On Eliot’s anti-Semitism, see especially Anthony Julius, T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²²⁴ Beckett, “Enough,” 190.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

Sometimes it refuses. When it refuses I go on. Too much silence is too much.

Or it's my voice too weak at times. The one that comes out of me. So much for the art and craft.²²⁶

She is not Lot's wife. She does not look back and condemn herself to bear mute, immobile witness to the old man's destruction. But, even facing forward, she can still hear behind her the notations of the pen drawing her actions back into familiar words, assimilating her beginning back into the "plane of the feasible,"²²⁷ back into the habitual comforts of "the art and craft."²²⁸ She tries to go on when the pen stops; she tries to break the silence with her "too weak" voice; but when the next paragraph begins, she is back in the past tense, narrating the old man in the old man's language. She only achieves the future tense once, near the end: "Now I'll wipe out everything but the flowers,"²²⁹ commencing the act of erasure demanded by the work's opening imperative. But the flowers remain, the flowers on which the old man has spilled "the ejaculations and broken paternosters;" and as the narrator consumes these flowers ("We lived on flowers. So much for sustenance."²³⁰), the last remnants of the old man's language and culture once again enter her body as it continues on, even if they can no longer engender anything there.

The old man may have lost the ability to reproduce, but imagining a futurity without him and his language proves to be a daunting task: "What do I know of man's destiny?" the narrator queries. "I could tell you more about radishes. For them he had a fondness. If I saw one I

²²⁶ Ibid., 186.

²²⁷ Beckett, "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," *Disjecta*, 139.

²²⁸ See "Three Dialogues," 145: "My case, since I am in the dock, is that van Velde is the first to desist from this estheticized automatism, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living." I discuss this passage at length in the preceding chapter.

²²⁹ Beckett, "Enough," 192.

²³⁰ Ibid., 192.

would name it without hesitation.”²³¹ The distinction presented here between the ease of naming the already known—that which the old man desires or for which “he had a fondness”—and the difficulty of imagining a futurity beyond the certainty of that naming occupies and pervades much of Beckett’s short fiction from the ‘60s. In All Strange Away, this dichotomy takes form in the competing refrains, “all that most clear” and “imagine later.” The former refrain usually follows a more or less quantitative description or measurement of the observable physical features of an object or space, and it declares in the present tense that something is the case; the latter usually appears with regard to an emotion or concept that is less easily quantified and cannot be made immediately available to language, and it tries to open up a future or a time outside of the immediate certainty of the already known in which such things may be imagined. But figuring this outside temporally, as “later,” introduces certain difficulties, and it soon becomes clear that the refrain, “imagine later,” does more than just remind the narrative voice to imagine something at another time; rather, “later” is what must be imagined. “Out of the door and down the road in the old hat and coat like after the war, no, not that again,”²³² the voice says, evoking and rejecting not only Beckett’s own previous modus operandi—present in the prose fiction from the four Nouvelles through Comment c’est—but the journey motif that has pervaded Western literature since The Odyssey. In disavowing this motif, All Strange Away disables one of the most common and conventional ways of representing narrative temporality—spatialization—through which “later” comes to mean a further stage in the journey, a further distance achieved. “We did not keep tally of the days,” the narrator of “Enough” recalls: “If I arrive at ten years it is thanks to our pedometer. Total mileage divided by average daily

²³¹ Ibid., 192.

²³² Beckett, All Strange Away, 169.

mileage.”²³³ She finds herself unable to narrate “after” the old man in part because she cannot imagine “after” him in terms other than his own: in taking the two steps needed to move beyond him, she has resumed his journey and immediately finds herself back in his language, going on but figuring “on” in terms of one of the primordial motifs of Western literature. All Strange Away, having disabled this motif from the start, tries to imagine other forms of temporality that will prevent “later” from being assimilated back into the familiarity of “all that most clear.” Hence, the discarded journey motif gives way first to the grey rubber ball that is squeezed periodically, and subsequently, in Imagination Dead Imagine and The Lost Ones, to the cycles of light and heat. In these latter works, which replace linear with cyclical time, “on” past the old man or outside the “all that most clear” cannot be figured as “later;” nor, for that matter, can they be figured as a further distance, since these works are set in closed spaces, a rotunda and a cylinder, respectively. The Lost Ones does maintain All Strange Away’s distinction between “all that most clear” and “imagine later,” but it figures this distinction as inside/outside, where the certainty of the already known may be found inside the cylinder, and outside of that certainty is literally outside the cylinder: “For in the cylinder alone are certitudes to be found and without nothing but mystery.”²³⁴ But here, again, the work remains suspended between the two poles of this dichotomy. The inhabitants’ achievement of a way out of the cylinder “is conceivable,” but it remains unrealized for lack of the cooperative effort required to stabilize a ladder in the center of the cylinder without leaning it against a wall.²³⁵ Alternatively, the work closes by postulating an “unthinkable end,”²³⁶ the prospective death of the cylinder’s population, but it formulates this apocalypse in the conditional tense: “So much roughly speaking for the last state of the cylinder

²³³ Beckett, “Enough,” 191.

²³⁴ Samuel Beckett, The Lost Ones, The Complete Short Prose, 216.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

and of this little people of searchers one first of whom if a man in some unthinkable past for the first time bowed his head if this notion is maintained.”²³⁷ As usual, Beckett refuses culmination: the inhabitants may not be able to achieve, only imagine, a way out of the familiar certitude of the cylinder, but neither are they condemned inevitably to die within it.

The real interest of The Lost Ones for the present chapter, however, lies in its treatment of the institutions of culture—custom, law, religion, etc.—together with the destruction of language. This latter operation occurs in The Lost Ones’ sister-piece, “Bing,” which emerged in 1966 (with its English version, “Ping,” following the next year) as a residue from the temporarily abandoned Le Dépeupleur; Beckett eventually finished and published Le Dépeupleur in 1970, and its English version, The Lost Ones, followed in 1972. Despite their drastic formal and thematic differences, then, Le Dépeupleur/The Lost Ones and “Bing”/“Ping” must be considered in tandem, as each other’s supplements, as two residua produced and aborted by the same process; Beckett even describes “Bing” in a manuscript note as “the result or miniaturization of Le Dépeupleur abandoned because of its intractable complexities.”²³⁸ Together, they articulate a nexus at which Beckett’s formal experimentation with literary language engages the broader historical and cultural questions discussed throughout this chapter.

Although The Lost Ones includes a number of familiar Beckettian themes and scenarios—bodies in closed spaces, languishing in a perpetual middle without progress or culmination, the vain search for a way out—its almost Borgesian anthropological style and perspective make it an uncharacteristic fiction for Beckett, one in which the question of culture appears in unusually sharp relief. The third person narrative voice surveys the cylinder and its

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

²³⁸ *Grove Companion*, 57. “Ping” was published in Suhrkamp’s trilingual Residua collection in 1970; both “Ping” and The Lost Ones were published in English in John Calder’s Six Residua in 1978.

inhabitants, and it describes their “custom[s],”²³⁹ “conventions,” “laws,”²⁴⁰ “ethics,”²⁴¹ “code[s],” and “rule[s],”²⁴² their various and competing views regarding the myth of a way out, and even a “[p]icturesque detail”²⁴³ or two. It restricts itself almost entirely to empirical observation and notation, and it records “data and evidences”²⁴⁴ with an eye towards offering a complete “aperçu”²⁴⁵ of the abode and its constituent parts, arranged for analysis. Judgment enters only infrequently, but it appears in repeated comments about the strangeness of the culture and customs of the cylinder.²⁴⁶ In making this judgment, the narrative gives the lie to its assumed objectivity and betrays its own grounding in a culture whose customs and values it treats as the norm against which the culture of the cylinder must be evaluated. We have, then, a fiction of (implicitly) *comparative* anthropology—the culture of the cylinder set against that of the narrative voice (and, presumably, its readership)—wherein the latter of these two lays claim to exhaustive knowledge and mastery of the former, as demonstrated, for example, by the classification of all bodies within the cylinder into four types, based on position and movement. The situation, style, and perspective of this fiction clearly evoke the history of European imperialism in the New World, Africa, and Asia: the assertion of strangeness that echoes travel narratives of the so called “Age of Discovery,” in which astonished European explorers encountered customs and rituals too foreign to comprehend; the objectification and classification of peoples and customs by a dispassionate, if occasionally amused (“Picturesque detail!”), anthropology; the establishment of a hierarchy of power and subordination as a function of this

²³⁹ Beckett, *The Lost Ones*, 203.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁴⁶ “This at first sight is strange” (208); “This is indeed strange” (209); “Stranger still at such times...” (220); etc.

dispassionate study; and so on. That Beckett links this anthropological conception of culture to the history of European imperialism in a work from the mid- to late 60's, in the midst of decolonization and a new phase of imperialism in Vietnam, bears a political import that merits further scrutiny elsewhere, especially in light of the struggle for home rule in the Ireland of his youth; but these considerations lie outside the scope of this study. What is significant here is The Lost Ones' elaboration of a particular image of culture—formulated according to the history of European modernity, from Dante's comparative study of the vernacular languages, “manners and customs” of the Romance peoples in De Vulgari Eloquentia to the development and formalization of anthropology as an adjunct to Europe's global imperial enterprise—presented in the moment in which it ceases to be historically viable.

When read in tandem with “Ping”—which foregrounds the question of language that is otherwise absent from The Lost Ones—we find Beckett revisiting the nexus of language, culture, and nation that Dante first articulated at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Where Dante produced a vernacular that grounded the formation of a national culture in Italy, however, Beckett seems bent on destroying any such culture from the ground up, upending syntaxes and disallowing the cultivation of sense or meaning:

All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn. Light heat white floor one square yard never seen. White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen. Bare white body fixed only the eyes only just. Traces blurs light grey almost white on white. Hands hanging palms front white feet heels together right angle. Light heat white planes shining white bare white

body ping fixed elsewhere. Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white.²⁴⁷

The clipped, staccato pacing of an almost entirely monosyllabic passage, the repetition of words and word groupings, the abandonment of conventional syntax, and the interjection of the mechanical “ping” create a machine-like rhythm that reduces words to surface sound and appearance. The opening utterance, “All known”—yet another version of “all that most clear”—seems to forbid interpretation and meaning in advance (“signs no meaning”), especially as it becomes yet another refrain, yet another element subsumed into the work’s mechanical repetition. But if such a language cannot express the consciousness and culture of a nation, neither does it express the destruction of poetic possibility. As the “pings” increase in frequency and the machine-like rhythm intensifies, the “all known” begins to lose its certainty and surface transparency. Compare the opening passage quoted above with

Light heat all known all white planes meeting invisible. Ping murmur only just almost never one second perhaps a meaning that much memory almost never. White feet toes joined like sewn heels together right angle ping elsewhere no sound. Hands hanging palms front legs joined like sewn. Head haught eyes holes light blue almost white fixed front silence within. Ping elsewhere always there but that known not.²⁴⁸

These passages employ many of the same elements, phrases, and images, but the differing arrangements produce different associations and interactions: in the earlier passage, “ping” is “fixed” and accordingly associated with the stasis of “all known” and the surface texture of “signs no meaning.” In the later passage, as “ping” joins “murmur”—a combination that recurs

²⁴⁷ Samuel Beckett, “Ping,” *The Complete Short Prose*, 193.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 194.

with increasing frequency through the middle of the work—“perhaps a meaning” replaces “signs no meaning,” and “that known not” at least partially qualifies “all known.” Even if we cannot say that “ping” becomes meaningful in such moments, it at least seems that its function within the work has changed: “ping” ceases to be a strictly mechanical sound that destroys any kind of sense beyond surface sound and starts to act as a tag or marker that appears in conjunction with the attempt to articulate an “elsewhere,” a “that known not,” a “murmur” that expresses “perhaps a meaning.” Furthermore, the onomatopoeic creation of a mechanical-linguistic marker, and the fact that this onomatopoeia differs across the French and English versions—“ping” operates as the English translation of *both* “bing” and “hop” from the French—suggest not the destruction, but the reformulation and transformation of literary language.

But does such a language articulate a public? If Joyce’s Work in Progress summons an “international phenomenon” as its reader, what reader does “Ping” or Worstward Ho summon? What material conditions does their language express? The next chapters will pursue these questions—and continue to investigate Beckett’s transformation of literary language—along two disparate paths: following, first, Beckett’s practice of self-translation and, second, his experimentation with technology and new media in the dramatic works.

4.0 SELF-TRANSLATION AND THE AFTER-LIFE OF THE WORK

“Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a mistaken premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English...The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own, he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign tongue.”

--Rudolf Pannwitz, Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur²⁴⁹

The preceding chapter showed that Beckett’s works, even at their most sparse and seemingly abstract, nonetheless display an historical consciousness and elaborate an image of Europe and its literary culture as outdated forms of intelligibility in the moment of their obsolescence. If imagining a futurity after Europe proved to be a task that could not be accomplished without recourse to the very motifs and figures of thought that constituted it, it also became clear that the status of literary language and its possibilities lies at the center of Beckett’s literary project. This study has, to this point, focused on demonstrating that Beckett’s formal experimentation with literary language in his works expresses an historical consciousness of lateness that tries to eschew, discard, or work around obsolete forms of intelligibility and create new beginnings

²⁴⁹ Quoted in Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 261-262.

without succumbing to a “myth of cultural apocalypse.” Thus, the aims of the first two chapters—though both were grounded in close readings, rather than the formulation of an overarching Beckettian aesthetic theory—were broadly synthetic, joining formal and historical concerns, and they sought to develop ways of reading a notoriously difficult body of work.

The present chapter will focus more directly on Beckett’s literary experimentation and its effects on language, attending specifically to one of the most unique and salient features of his *oeuvre*: his almost career-long practice of writing in two languages and translating between them. This shift in focus will not lead us away from the preceding chapters’ historical concerns, however; on the contrary, this chapter will read Beckett’s self-translation not only as a kind of formal experimentation with language, but as a reflection on the historicity of language and its possibilities in literature. Self-translation, then, is not only a means towards an ever more radical literary language; it is how Beckett continues to assay the nexus of language, literature, and nation that Dante articulated in the early fourteenth century, the very nexus that ceased to be viable in the twentieth and that remained fraught with danger for a cosmopolitan Irishman looking for a way out of the traps of nationalism. The present chapter will read Beckett’s self-translation as a way of engaging this historical nexus and disengaging language from nation, on the way to an international literature.

4.1 “THE LIFE OF LANGUAGE AND ITS WORKS”

Walter Benjamin’s 1921 essay on “The Task of the Translator” will provide a fruitful point of departure, as its theory of translation as a meta-literary practice that monitors historical transformations in language will help us to link Beckett’s early meditation on language and

culture in “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce” to his equally formative work as a translator around the same time. Benjamin begins his essay by discounting reception theories of both literature and, by extension, translation; for, if “[n]o poem is intended for the reader,”²⁵⁰ as Benjamin claims, then neither should be its translation. In this way, Benjamin immediately dismisses any conception of translation grounded in the idea of making the original work accessible to other audiences, since the work’s value, in any language, lies not in the content that it conveys to the reader, but in the way that it elaborates language itself. Translation is not merely a means that provides greater access to the original by “copying” it in a different language, but a “form,”²⁵¹ a distinct mode of literary activity whose aims supplement those of the original. This form belongs, Benjamin says, to the “afterlife” of the work, to a time somewhat later than the work’s origin: “translation marks [the work’s] stage of continued life.”²⁵² Benjamin’s conception, here, of the “life” and “afterlife” of literary works should not be mistaken for an idealist notion of the work’s “spirit.” On the contrary, this conception emerges from a materialist understanding of the work and its historical elaboration: “everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life,”²⁵³ and the work’s history develops and unfolds through material processes and practices, including translation and criticism. Translation as a literary form continues to elaborate the original, to transform its meanings, to preside over its historical destiny centuries after it has been brought into the world. Through this process, “the life of the originals attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding.”²⁵⁴ Translation, thus, forms one of the material processes by which the work survives, enters

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 253.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 254.

²⁵² Ibid., 254.

²⁵³ Ibid., 255.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 255.

tradition, and becomes formative for future generations. And, since each subsequent translation reveals the extent to which the languages involved have changed since the last translation, translation monitors the historical transformations that the work and its languages undergo. Thus, translation “is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages”—the one merely copying or substituting itself for the other—“that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.”²⁵⁵

This means, for Benjamin, that the object of any “good” translation—that to which it addresses itself—is not the transmission of the original content to a different audience, but the historicity of language. Put differently, translation does not direct its efforts towards the reader, but towards the “life of language and its works.”²⁵⁶ Translation is an operation of language upon language that, thus, engages the relationship between languages. But since the “innermost relationship of languages to one another”²⁵⁷ cannot be fully revealed in time through historically contingent linguistic forms—for if such a relation exists in itself, it can only exist outside of history (at “the messianic end”²⁵⁸ of history, Benjamin says)—translation *represents* this relation “in embryonic or intensive form.”²⁵⁹ That is, translation indexes—immanently, within the translated work—the historical relation of languages to each other, in the very process of transformation. And, since translation continues to unfold the afterlife of the language’s works, it contributes to this elaboration and transformation.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 256.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 256.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 255.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 257.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 255.

These considerations—that translation is a distinct literary form that attends specifically to historical transformations in language even as it contributes to those transformations—will guide our reading and evaluation of Beckett’s practice of self-translation in this chapter. For, if we are to treat this practice as a significant, even defining, aspect of Beckett’s overall literary project, then we must immediately dispense with the idea that Beckett translated his own works for the sake of his audience; and indeed, for the most part, the current critical consensus on Beckett’s self-translations upholds this.²⁶⁰ Although Beckett undertook his last *hired* translation project before achieving international fame, the fact that a world renowned, Nobel Prize winning writer, whose works would have been translated anyway, would continue to translate these works himself when he drew no pleasure from it at least hints at the value that he attributed to the process.²⁶¹

We can begin to assess this value by looking back at Beckett’s first major work as a translator: he produced, together with Alfred Péron, a French version of the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” section of James Joyce’s Work in Progress. The extent to which the final, published French version of “Anna Livia Plurabelle” reflects Beckett’s and Péron’s work has been a contentious point in the somewhat infamous history of this translation, beginning with its first public reading at a séance honoring Joyce; however, Megan Quigley argues convincingly that the version that appeared in the Nouvelle Revue Française in 1931—the version that Joyce, Paul Léon, Ivan Goll, Philippe Soupault, and others had supposedly reworked extensively—is, in fact,

²⁶⁰ Pascale Casanova qualifies this perspective in The World Republic of Letters, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), however, as she claims that Beckett began writing in French to attract Parisian audiences, that is, “to stake his claim to literary existence” (141); though, she acknowledges that Beckett’s practice of self-translation, which he continued long after his “literary existence” ceased to be in question, became an integral part of his unique literary endeavor.

²⁶¹ See Ackerley and Gontarski, 14. Beckett’s “last commercial translation,” an Anthology of Mexican Poetry, was published in 1958, though Beckett completed the translations in 1951, two years before the first performance of En attendant Godot.

nearly identical with the final typescript that Beckett and Péron produced.²⁶² Furthermore, Quigley refutes the consensus critical opinion that treats the Beckett-Péron translation “as the scapegoat to contrast the presumed genius of Joyce’s method with the plodding literal translation that might have occurred had hacks like Beckett and Péron been permitted to finish the job,”²⁶³ as she shows how far Beckett and Péron had to depart from Joyce’s original text in order to match his linguistic innovations in another language; and indeed, upon submitting an earlier version of the translation to Soupault, Beckett expressed the fear that he and Péron had produced a work “trop éloigné de l’original.”²⁶⁴ Quigley shows that, far from churning out a “plodding literal translation,” “Beckett attempted to recreate the text in French, playing with French homophones, portmanteaux, and riddles and undermining signification in French just as Joyce did in English.”²⁶⁵

After all, if in Work in Progress, “form *is* content, content *is* form”—as Beckett claimed not long before in “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce”—then, surely, a “plodding literal translation” would not even be possible, as the content cannot be sufficiently separated from the form of expression to be transferred to another.²⁶⁶ There can be no question of copying the work in another language; translating “Anna Livia Plurabelle” can only mean reinventing it. Umberto Eco calls Finnegans Wake “the easiest text to translate” for precisely this reason, “because it

²⁶² Megan M. Quigley, “Justice for the ‘Illstarred Punster’: Samuel Beckett and Alfred Péron’s Revisions of ‘Anna Lyvia Pluratsself,’” James Joyce Quarterly 44.3 (Spring 2004): 469-487. Quigley spurns the received accounts—from Soupault and Eugene Jolas—of the production of this translation and, in investigating the series of drafts and typescripts that Beckett and Péron produced, determines that the final published version contains “fewer than a dozen small changes” (477) from the last Beckett-Péron typescript. Quigley speculates that Joyce’s insistence on the inadequacy of the Beckett-Péron version was rooted in personal and political motives.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 469.

²⁶⁴ Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940, 38. Letter to Philippe Soupault, 5 August 1930.

²⁶⁵ Quigley, “Justice for the ‘Illstarred Punster,’” 474. Having examined the revisions and corrections that Beckett and Péron made, each in his own hand, to each successive version of the translation, Quigley attributes the most extreme inventions to Beckett, while Péron, who was a native speaker of French, helped to mold those inventions into more recognizably French idioms.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 480.

allows for the greatest artistic license.”²⁶⁷ Beckett, by contrast, complains of “the futility of the translation”²⁶⁸ due to the original’s particular intention towards language. Since, as he argued before, Work in Progress represents an attempt to “desophisticate language” and create a new “direct expression” through linguistic hybridization, multilingual puns, allusions, and neologisms, he must have realized that he was not translating from English at all; indeed, when speaking of the difficulties of the translation, he once again refers to the language of Work in Progress as “hieroglyphics,”²⁶⁹ a pictorial primitive language not far removed from the vitality of gesture, but far indeed from English’s abstraction “to death.” Nor, by extension, could he have hoped to translate “Anna Livia Plurabelle” to French, as doing so would betray the original’s anti-national intentions. He could only join an ongoing process of linguistic deconstruction and invention by beginning at a different point, starting with the structures, idioms, and colloquialisms of French and working towards the same disengagement of language and nation that Joyce achieves, further cultivating the emerging international public that Joyce’s work articulates. Here, translation cannot mean establishing a relation of equivalence between two languages and transferring content from one to the other, nor can it mean making a monument of national culture legible to another nation; it means elaborating the historical legacy of the original in its afterlife, which, in this case, entails continuing the drive towards illegibility, or more precisely, towards a new international legibility.

This process, as Benjamin says, yields results whose significance belongs to “the life of language and its works.” But translating “Anna Livia Plurabelle” adds another dimension that

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 487. Here, Quigley translates from Eco’s introduction to Anna Livia Plurabelle di James Joyce, ed. by Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1996).

²⁶⁸ The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940, 78. Letter to Thomas McGreevy, 29 May 1931.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 41. Letter to Thomas McGreevy, 7 August 1930.

even Benjamin does not anticipate. In most translations, the basic structural difference between the original work and its translation may be characterized as follows:

Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.²⁷⁰

Translation does not immerse itself in a language in the way that the original work usually does, but stands outside of it, at a distance from which it can address the “language as a whole, taking an individual work in an alien language as a point of departure.”²⁷¹ But since Joyce’s “Anna Livia Plurabelle” already seeks a position outside the language forest from which it assays “language as a whole,” translating this work means finding a position still further from the center of the language forest, a position from which to assay both the language and its first assay. It means doubling an already meta-linguistic process, intensifying its assault upon language, and further exploring the possibility of a position outside of language. This intensification would prove formative for Beckett’s developing literary project, especially as he sought to differentiate his work from Joyce’s. For, while the opportunity to translate a work such as “Anna Livia Plurabelle” may have been unique, Beckett would later find a way to produce this kind of doubling and intensification on his own: by translating his own works.

²⁷⁰ Benjamin, 258-259.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 259.

4.2 AUTRE(S) ET PAREIL(LES)

Beckett published a French translation of his novel, Murphy (aided by Alfred Péron), in 1946, but he did not adopt self-translation as a major component of his literary practice until the early 1950s, immediately following the unprecedented creative florescence of the mid to late '40s that ultimately led him to international fame. Nonetheless, it should already be clear that, before Beckett ever got his literary career off the ground, translation appeared to him as an abiding concern and a central aspect of a literary problematic closely linked to his ruminations on Dante, language, nation, and the future of Europe, which form the foundation of the historical consciousness of lateness that would ground and define his subsequent literary endeavor. His decision to begin writing in French in the late '30s and to stop writing in English altogether by the late '40s (after completing Watt) bears similar import, for, as Leslie Hill argues, Beckett came to the French language first and foremost through translation: he had learned it primarily through academic study, rather than immersion, which likely meant acquiring the language through translation exercises; and, by the time he began to write in French, he already had numerous published English-to-French translations to his name, including both “Anna Livia Plurabelle” and his own Murphy.²⁷² Beckett’s French, then, was always already a French in translation, a French within which he was never entirely at home. Indeed, few critics who have studied Beckett’s French have failed to note its deliberate foreignness, its Anglicisms, its idiomatically incorrect puns, its stilted syntax: John Fletcher, for example, claims that “one can

²⁷² Leslie Hill, “The Trilogy Translated,” Beckett’s Fiction: In Different Words (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 43. Beckett had also published a number of French-to-English translations, including poems by Paul Eluard and others for the Surrealist number of This Quarter in 1932.

detect that [Beckett] is conscious of writing in a foreign tongue, and enjoys manipulating it.”²⁷³ Beckett’s first creative works in French, the Poèmes 1937-1939,²⁷⁴ find him in this very attitude, assaying the alien language to see what it will yield. The first of these poems, the five-line “elles viennent,” appears in the Collected Poems in English and French in both languages on facing pages:

elles viennent

autres et pareilles

avec chacune c’est autre et c’est pareil

avec chacune l’absence d’amour est autre

avec chacune l’absence d’amour est pareille

they come

different and the same

with each it is different and the same

with each the absence of love is different

with each the absence of love is the same²⁷⁵

When placed side by side, the wordplay and experimentation with the conventions of French become evident: the opening line of the French version, for example, cannot be rendered in English without losing either the minimalist elegance of its formulation or the gender specification of the “they” that come, since English does not have a gendered third person plural pronoun. A more significant difference occurs in the latter half of the poem, where the fourth

²⁷³ John Fletcher, Samuel Beckett’s Art, 98.

²⁷⁴ First published in Les Temps modernes (November, 1946).

²⁷⁵ Samuel Beckett, Collected Poems in English and French (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 38-39.

and fifth lines of the English version seem to expand and analyze the third, such that the “absence of love” that is “different” in line 4 and “the same” in line 5 names the “it” that is both “different and the same” in line 3. In the French version, however, the shifting gender of the adjective, “pareil,” complicates that interpretation: although the “ce” that is “pareil” (masculine) in line 3 might still be the “absence d’amour” that is “pareille” (feminine) in line 5 (since “c’est” never takes a feminine predicate adjective, regardless of the referent of “ce”), this identification seems less obvious in the French than in English, as the differing genders of the adjectives in lines 3 and 5 at least make it look like their corresponding nouns differ as well. In any case, it is clear that Beckett has created an interpretive aporia literally at the center of the poem (What is the “ce” that is both “autre” and “pareil?”) by contriving a series of grammatical constructions that allow him to cycle through the various endings (except the masculine plural) that the adjective, “pareil,” can take. This aporia emerges not from an ambiguity in the meaning of words, but from the structure and conventions of the language; and this aporia does not translate to the English version. When read together, an impasse occurs *between* the poems that expresses their incommensurability as a function of differences in the specific forms and conventions of the languages involved. Here, translation—and especially the moment of untranslatability—thus affords a comparative perspective through which the constitutive structures and elements of each language becomes visible. Indeed, this may as well be the theme of “elles viennent,” as the poem deliberately seeks this moment of untranslatability in order to draw attention to the specificities of its languages; and “les langues” may as well be the unspoken referent of the poem’s opening pronoun, since it is ultimately “langues”—plural, simultaneously “autres et pareilles,” different and the same—that the poems speak.

Of course, “elles viennent” does not figure among Beckett’s better or more important works—he would not even permit Minuit to publish an edition of the French poems until the late ‘60s—but its schoolboy-grammar-exercise style and interpretive markers that deliberately get lost between languages nonetheless show the extent to which Beckett’s French is a French in translation; and his initial move from English is not a move *to* French unequivocally, but to a position *between* English and French, a position (as Benjamin says) at the edge of the language forest, a position from which he assays both languages in relation to each other. In this way, Beckett’s decision to change languages marks a crucial early moment in the development of the essayistic literary *ethos* described in the first chapter, whose destructive aesthetic simultaneously enacts a process of testing that elaborates the historical possibilities of the very language(s) whose habitual forms it rejects; and translation as a form—or writing in a French fraught with the linguistic markers of translation—permits him the necessary perspective on the historicity of language to carry out this literary endeavor. Just as this essayistic *ethos* is grounded in the historical consciousness of lateness and the obsolescence of the received literary and linguistic conventions, so we may think of translation as a “late form,” as it operates after the fact, in the “afterlife” of the work; and translation watches over the historical transformation of language, withholding rather than immersing itself, just as the essayistic *ethos* withholds credence and holds itself at a distance from the literary forms and conventions that it nonetheless employs.

The historical implications of Beckett’s decision to change languages certainly did not escape him: his own frequently quoted comments—that he abandoned English “because you couldn’t help writing poetry in it” and embraced French because it “had the right ‘weakening’ effect” and because “en français c’est plus facile d’écrire sans style”²⁷⁶—clearly resonate with

²⁷⁶ Quoted in Ruby Cohn, Back to Beckett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 58.

his remark, in “Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce,” that “no language is so sophisticated as English. It is abstracted to death.” Thus, his refusal of English’s “temptation to rhetoric and virtuosity”²⁷⁷ and his effort to “weaken” his writing by working in a foreign tongue have to be considered not as tactics toward a minimalism that progressively distills an essential message, but as an attempt to approximate the “poverty of language” that, according to Vico, forms one of the prime conditions for the primitive articulation of civilizational beginnings; as he says, “[Je] me remis à écrire—en français—avec le désir de m’appauvrir [to impoverish myself] encore davantage. C’était ça le vrai mobile.”²⁷⁸ In this way, Beckett’s effort to deliberately impoverish the language of his works by writing in French must be read as a further expression of the historical consciousness of lateness that emerges, in part, from his sustained reflection on Vico’s primitivism and Dante’s nexus of language, literature, and nation as they pertain to the historical destiny of Europe in the twentieth century.

It is from this perspective that we can begin to evaluate the significance of Beckett’s later practice of self-translation, for if his decision to move from English to French effectively afforded him a position and perspective *between* languages from which to assay both, then certainly, his move to write in both languages and translate between them intensified this perspective considerably. His story, “La Fin,” will serve as an instructive example here, as it marks both his first major work of creative fiction written directly in French—in many ways, it inaugurated Beckett’s period of intense creative activity in the late ‘40s that launched him to fame—and one of his first efforts at self-translation from French to English.²⁷⁹ More than this, Beckett published the story in multiple forms in both languages, so tracing its successive

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 58.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 59.

²⁷⁹ Waiting for Godot and the first English version of “The End” were both published in 1954. The English Molloy did not appear until 1955.

incarnations will afford us a critical vantage point from which to evaluate the significance of self-translation to Beckett's literary aesthetic and *ethos*. I said a moment ago that Beckett wrote the story "directly" in French, but this is not quite right: he began the story in English, in February 1946, but changed languages a month later and published it in Les Temps modernes (under the title, "Suite") in July of the same year.²⁸⁰ However, due to a by-now-well-known misunderstanding between Beckett and Simone de Beauvoir—who edited the journal with Jean-Paul Sartre—Les Temps modernes only published the first half of the story.²⁸¹ The full French version did not see publication until nine years later, as "La Fin," when included in Nouvelles et Textes pour rien in 1955. In the meantime, Richard Seaver and Beckett collaborated on and published a full English translation—titled "The End"—in 1954.²⁸² As with "Suite," however, the first publication of the story in English was fraught with errors and disappointment; Beckett was particularly upset that the Merlin press (in whose journal the story appeared) did not even allow him to correct the proofs before printing the story.²⁸³ The revised second translation (first published in the Evergreen Review in 1960), which would eventually become the canonical English version included in the 1967 Stories and Texts for Nothing, does much more than just fix the errors from the first printing, though; it completely retranslates the work from the French, assaying it a second time. The differences in the various versions of the opening, for example, begin to reveal the extent to which Beckett reworked the story in each successive iteration:

Ils me vêtirent et me donnèrent de l'argent. Je savais à quoi l'argent devait servir, il devait servir à me faire démarrer. Quand je l'aurais dépensé je devrais m'en procurer d'autre, si je voulais continuer. Même chose pour les chaussures, quand

²⁸⁰ Knowlson, 325.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 325-326. Knowlson provides a detailed and sympathetic account of this misunderstanding.

²⁸² Samuel Beckett, "The End," Merlin 2.3 (1954), trans. by Richard Seaver and Samuel Beckett: 144-159.

²⁸³ Knowlson, 358.

elles seraient usées je devrais les faire réparer, ou m'en procurer d'autres, ou continuer pieds nus, si je voulais continuer. Même chose pour la veste et le pantalon, ils n'avaient pas besoin de me le dire, à cela pres que je pourrais continuer en bras de chemise, si je voulais.²⁸⁴

The 1954 Merlin translation reads:

They dressed me and gave me money. I knew what the money was to be used for, it was for my travelling expenses. When it was gone, they said, I would have to get some more, if I wanted to go on travelling. The same for my shoes, when they were worn out I would have to have them repaired, or get myself another pair, or go on my way barefoot, if I wanted to go on. The same for my coat and trousers, needless to say, with this difference, that I could very well go on my way in my shirtsleeves, if necessary, particularly in warm weather, if I wanted to.²⁸⁵

And the 1967 Stories and Texts for Nothing version reads:

They clothed me and gave me money. I knew what the money was for, it was to get me started. When it was gone I would have to get more, if I wanted to go on. The same for the shoes, when they were worn out I would have to get them mended, or get myself another pair, or go on barefoot, if I wanted to go on. The same for the coat and trousers, needless to say, with this difference, that I could go on in my shirtsleeves, if I wanted.²⁸⁶

In general, the second translation stays closer to the French. This does not always mean, however, that it translates more *literally* than its predecessor: for, although “to get me started”

²⁸⁴ Samuel Beckett, “La Fin,” Nouvelles et Textes pour rien, 77.

²⁸⁵ “The End,” Merlin 2.3, 144.

²⁸⁶ Samuel Beckett, “The End,” Stories and Texts for Nothing, 47.

(1967) undoubtedly renders “à me faire démarrer” more literally than “for my travelling expenses” (1954), “repaired” (1954) translates “réparer” more literally than the more colloquially English “mended” (1967), and the somewhat convoluted syntax of “what the money was to be used for” (1954) more closely mimics the verb construction of “à quoi l’argent devait servir” than the simpler, more informal “what the money was for” (1967). The 1967 version remains closer to the style of the French, however, as it retains the French’s tendency to turn phrases into refrains through repetition: it always translates “continuer” as “go on,” for example, and it maintains the word-for-word repetition of “si je voulais continuer” in the third and fourth sentences, rendering both identically as “if I wanted to go on.” The 1954 translation, by contrast, introduces slight variations into this refrain—translating “continuer” variously as “go on,” “go on travelling,” and “go on my way”—such that it never becomes a refrain at all, but tends more towards the kind of linguistic diversity, even in the formulation of similar phrases, that one would expect from a native speaker. What’s more, this first translation often throws in additional flourishes not found in the French (e.g., “if necessary, particularly in warm weather” or, later on, “In your plutocratic Sodom”²⁸⁷), which further display its relative facility with the language, as compared to the French. Overall, the 1954 version feels more natural, competent, and fluent (if sometimes less colloquial) than the 1967 version.

The latter, canonical translation eschews this fluency and deliberately diminishes its linguistic palette to more nearly approximate the relative impoverishment of Beckett’s French. It achieves this at times by adhering closely to the exact text of the French, foregoing the frequent flourishes in which the 1954 version indulges; at other times, it achieves this effect by straying from a word-for-word rendering of the French, as in “what the money was for.” It avoids the

²⁸⁷ “The End,” *Merlin* 2.3, 155.

florid euphemisms of polite English, instead matching the vulgarity of the French (for example, translating “je pissais dessus” as “pissed on it,” which the 1954 translation renders more circumspectly as “made my water on it”)²⁸⁸ and occasionally even superseding it (the 1967 version says that one can masturbate to the age of seventy; the French cuts it off at fifty, the 1954 English version at forty).²⁸⁹ Perhaps most telling, however, is the second translation’s inclusion of what would become characteristically Beckettian interjections expressing fatigue, doubt, or hesitation, which the first translation excludes. Hence:

On y voyait aussi une sorte de champ de mars où des soldats jouaient au football, toute l’année. Seules les fenêtres—non. La propriété semblait abandonnée.²⁹⁰

appears in the 1967 version as:

A kind of parade ground was to be seen, where soldiers played football all the year round. Only the ground-floor windows—no, I can’t. The estate seemed abandoned.²⁹¹

and in the 1954 version as, “A kind of parade ground was also to be seen, where soldiers played football all year round. The estate seemed abandoned.”²⁹² Not only does the 1967 version retain the interjection from the French, which the 1954 version omits entirely, but it actually develops and intensifies it. The “non” with which the narrator interrupts his description of the estate in the French remains ambiguous: Does it indicate an inaccuracy in the information just provided? Has the narrator said more than he meant to or something that he had promised not to say? Did the narrator accidentally invert the desired order of his narration? This latter interpretation seems the

²⁸⁸ “La Fin,” 91. “The End,” *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, 54. “The End,” *Merlin* 2.3, 148.

²⁸⁹ “The End,” *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, 65. “La Fin,” 110. “The End,” *Merlin* 2.3, 155.

²⁹⁰ “La Fin,” 114.

²⁹¹ “The End,” *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, 67.

²⁹² “The End,” *Merlin* 2.3, 156

most plausible, given that the narrator returns, four sentences later, to the aborted sentence: “Seules les fenêtres du rez-de-chaussée avaient des volets.”²⁹³ It would appear that he started to deliver this sentence too early, stopped himself, and returned to it at the proper moment. This interpretation is less convincing in the 1967 English version, however, as it makes no sense to say, “no, I can’t,” if one has merely misplaced a sentence. It is still possible that the narrator has said something that he shouldn’t have, but this is unlikely, since he soon returns to the abandoned sentence anyway. The most plausible reading of this “no, I can’t” calls into question the narrator’s competence, his ability to go on. He eventually manages—“Only the ground-floor windows had shutters”²⁹⁴—but for a brief moment, “the words desert [him], it’s as bad as that.”²⁹⁵ His fluency falters in this version—though not in the French, nor in the 1954 translation—in a way that weakens his English and allows it to approach the poverty of the French, even though Beckett has to depart from the original text to achieve this effect. And this departure creates a difference that is not merely idiomatic—changing the words to retain the sense—but ultimately semantic; for, while the “non” of the French text casts a momentary doubt upon the narrator’s competence as a storyteller, the stronger “no, I can’t” of the English suggests a more deep-seated difficulty with the language itself.

This intensification of the narrator’s incompetence in the canonical English translation compensates not only for Beckett’s greater fluency in his first language, but also for differences in the languages themselves. For, if he began writing in French to avoid English’s “temptation to rhetoric and virtuosity,” then his translation of “La Fin” from French to English had more to do than just make the story linguistically and culturally accessible to the Anglophone world. He had

²⁹³ “La Fin,” 114.

²⁹⁴ “The End,” *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, 67.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

to find a way to produce an English prose whose sophistication and abstraction would not surpass that of his French: in a word, he needed to create a different English, an English affected by the French original, through translation. Benjamin quotes Rudolf Pannwitz at length on this matter:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a mistaken premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English...The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own, he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge.

He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign tongue.²⁹⁶

Beckett did not translate “The End” a second time to correct printer’s errors: he translated it again because he had translated it inadequately the first time. He had allowed the “rhetoric and virtuosity” of his English to overmaster his comparatively impoverished French, and he had ultimately preserved “the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.” The second translation stays closer to the style, tone, and intention of the French—actively seeking the same poverty of language that the original evinces—and, in doing so, it produces a transformed English, an English no longer the same as that in which he began to write the story in 1946, an English that has been through the French and back again. More precisely, Beckett’s second translation achieves an austere

²⁹⁶ Benjamin, 261-262.

prose neither entirely French nor English, but somewhere in between: a literature at the edge of the language forest, no longer fully immersed, but not yet a literature of the unword.

Beckett's numerous essays and assaults upon his own words—as evidenced by the series of published versions of “La Fin”/“The End”—demonstrate clearly that self-translation, for Beckett, was not just a way to maintain control over his works and the means by which they were disseminated. Rather, it was a method—a distinct literary mode for operating on language, for operating between languages, for producing an always-already translated language, plural, at once “autre” and “pareille”—that was central to his entire literary endeavor, and through which he assayed the historical possibilities of literature in a moment of historical and civilizational transition.

4.3 “EXCESSES OF LANGUAGE”

Although Beckett had already translated his own Murphy, “La Fin” (the first time), and En attendant Godot, there could be little doubt, by the publication of the English Unnamable in 1958, that the trilogy marked Beckett's emergence as a fully bilingual writer; indeed, by this point, he had already started writing in English again and translating to French, in addition to working in the opposite direction.²⁹⁷ In this context, being a “fully bilingual writer” means more than just being equally likely to write in either language; it means that the linguistic effects produced by writing in and between two languages had become part of his literary repertoire, a

²⁹⁷ Beckett wrote From an Abandoned Work directly in English in 1954-55. It was published in the Evergreen Review 1.3 (1957): 83-91. He wrote All That Fall in 1956; it was published by Grove in 1957 and translated by Robert Pinget for publication by Minuit in 1957 as Tous ceux qui tombent. Krapp's Last Tape appeared in English in 1958, followed almost immediately the next year by its French translation (by Beckett and Pierre Leyris), La Dernière bande.

salient tactic whose deployment now contributed to the aims of his works more directly. If translating from “La Fin” to “The End” yielded a new, plural English between languages, this pluralization invariably led to excesses as well, to moments that the language can no longer contain or assimilate. “It seemed to me that all language was an excess of language,” Moran muses in the English Molloy; “Il me semblait que tout langage est un écart de langage,” runs the corresponding line in the French.²⁹⁸ But, as Sam Slote points out:

The English word “excess” is not quite the same as the French word “écart,” their meanings diverge or, in other words, are *à l'écart*. And this difference of meaning also entails an excess of meaning since the specific sense of each passage is slightly different and thus each passage slightly exceeds the other. In divergence there is excess and in excess divergence.²⁹⁹

Producing a plural language in translation means not only taking up a position between languages from which to assay both, but also producing excesses of language—moments of divergence in which the language cannot be made unified or whole, cannot be contained or assimilated—that create the same effect, revealing the limits of language by transgressing them. This pluralization of language that Beckett had achieved through self-translation in “La Fin”/“The End” emerges as an explicit theme and central preoccupation of L’Innommable and The Unnamable, such that self-translation as a form—and the way that the two versions of the novel interact—becomes an integral part of the novels’ overall aims and methods. We can see this, in fact, from the very beginning:

²⁹⁸ Samuel Beckett, Molloy, Three Novels trans. by Patrick Bowles and Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1955), 116. Samuel Beckett, Molloy (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1951), 158.

²⁹⁹ Sam Slote, “On Worstward Ho,” Journal of Beckett Studies 13.2 (Spring 2004): 188.

Où maintenant? Quand maintenant? Qui maintenant? Sans me le demander.
Dire je. Sans le penser. Appeler ça des questions, des hypothèses. Aller de
l'avant, appeler ça aller, appeler ça de l'avant.³⁰⁰

Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving.
Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call
that on.³⁰¹

The inversion of the second and third opening questions in the English version provides an immediately noticeable and easily avoidable divergence (there is no question of making these alterations for the sake of idiom or sense) that makes a deliberate show of differentiating the two versions of the novel from the outset. The novels continue to multiply and differentiate themselves in a variety of ways across the two languages in the sentences that follow. Most notably, the verb forms change, as The Unnamable translates L'Innommable's repeated infinitives (demander, dire, penser, appeler, aller) alternately as present participles (unquestioning, unbelieving, going) and second-person imperatives (say, call), finally combining the two (keep going, call that going). The rhythm of the passage changes accordingly, as The Unnamable's back-and-forth alternation between participle and imperative deviates palpably from L'Innommable's steady repetition of the infinitive. Yet, The Unnamable compensates for its comparatively diverse array of verb forms by condensing L'Innommable's prepositional phrases—"Sans me le demander" and "Sans le penser," the first of which includes a personal pronoun that suggests a first-person subject who denies asking the opening questions—into harsh, impersonal, austere, single-word negations: "Unquestioning." "Unbelieving." But the "I"

³⁰⁰ Samuel Beckett, L'Innommable (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1953), 7.

³⁰¹ Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable, Three Novels, 291.

reappears elsewhere in The Unnamable (“I, say I”), whether as a noun of direct address or as the first of two iterations of the word to be said, it is not clear; meanwhile, L’Innommable restricts itself in the corresponding sentence to the impersonal command, not even posed as a second-person imperative, “Dire je.” The pronoun, “le,” in the fourth and sixth sentences of L’Innommable specifies the questions not asked and the word not thought, respectively, while The Unnamable negates these questions and words more generally and indefinitely, refusing to indicate who is unquestioning, what is not questioned, and so forth; presumably, “Unquestioning” forbids more questions than just the three presented at the outset. And yet, this strengthened, more prohibitive negation does not prove decisive for the novel, which continues to question and to proceed by “affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered,”³⁰² regardless of its opening injunction against such a procedure. The Unnamable’s divergence from L’Innommable in this matter cannot be understood as improving upon it, then, deciding in revision what remained undecided in the first version, but as proliferating its possibilities and multiplying its forms of negation—without providing a means by which to decide among them—such that both versions, both languages, remain provisional. After all, if the fact of translation and its necessity as such reveals that no language is complete and sufficient unto itself, as Benjamin argues, then certainly Beckett’s translation of his trilogy plays a crucial role in a procedure that foregrounds the multiple, provisional nature of the novels’ language.

In fact, the divergent rhythms and linguistic patterns that multiply and disperse the already self-negating semantic content of the novels across two languages only underscore and intensify the novel’s pointed reflection on its own procedure:

³⁰² Ibid., 291.

What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed?
By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as
uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be other shifts.
Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless. I should mention
before going any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it
means. Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares? I don't know.³⁰³

Here, the novel questions how to go on—though the question has already been negated in advance (“Unquestioning”)—suggests ways to go on, negates those as well, expresses hope that it might find other ways to go on, negates that hope, and finally queries whether it is possible to remain ephectic, to suspend judgment on this matter of procedure and go on without *having* to decide how, and yet (paradoxically) do so knowingly and deliberately, “otherwise than unawares,” the convolution of this double negative perhaps suggesting how that might be achieved: “I don't know,” it determines, without determining anything. In the meantime, however, the novel *has*, in fact, gone on—past tense—and ephectically, at that, deferring the moment of decision indefinitely; whether it has done so “otherwise than unawares” is much harder to judge. If the novel cannot determine how to go on, however, surely we can at least describe how it *has* gone on: “By aporia pure and simple,” we might say, and be done with it. But the novel has already suggested and disabled this possibility; it even claims to use the term without knowing what it means, effectively creating an impasse before “aporia,” such that the very sign by which we might designate a narrative procedure that favors undecidability and deferral itself becomes deferred beyond decidability. Even the words that the novel puts forth to

³⁰³ Ibid., 291.

describe this procedure—“aporia” and “ephectic” (“aporie” and “éphectique” in the French³⁰⁴)—suggest the futility of the effort, as they are quite literally “all Greek” or beyond comprehension; and, although the idiom, “It was all Greek to me,” belongs to English but not French, Beckett had already employed it in translation by this point—both versions of “The End” render “Je n’y comprenais rien” in this way³⁰⁵—so that the idiom resonates even in his French. This implied bilingual pun further defers the question of procedure that occupies the novel by dispersing it across two languages (three, if one counts Greek).

Indeed, this question of procedure cannot even be posed without multiplying it, dispersing its semantic content beyond what either language can contain. Unlike “La Fin”/“The End,” where the question of how to “go on” is strictly one of “continuer” or continuation, L’Innommable and The Unnamable elaborate the question to include “aller de l’avant” or forging ahead; for, The Unnamable translates both “aller de l’avant” and “continuer” as “go on.”³⁰⁶ (Compare, for example, “Aller de l’avant, appeler ça aller, appeler ça de l’avant”/“Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on” from the novels’ opening with their famous endings: “il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, je vais continuer”/“you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”³⁰⁷) In these novels, does “go on” render “aller de l’avant” and “continuer” individually, each in its turn, or does it render both together, combining them as two modalities of the same procedure, or separate stages of the same modality? Does the English oversimplify the complexity of the French, or does it provide a unity of expression that the French cannot achieve on its own? L’Innommable’s and The Unnamable’s inability to decide these questions remains evident almost three decades later, when Beckett deemed Worstward Ho

³⁰⁴ L’Innommable, 7-8.

³⁰⁵ “La Fin,” 111. “The End,” Merlin 2.3, 155. “The End,” Stories and Texts for Nothing, 66.

³⁰⁶ “Go on” translates “Avancez” in Molloy, as well. Molloy (Minuit), 26. Molloy (Grove), 21.

³⁰⁷ L’Innommable, 213. The Unnamable, 414.

“untranslatable,” primarily because he could find no satisfactory way to render in French the “On” that propels the English text.³⁰⁸ Thus, even the effort to name the novel’s procedure produces an excess of language that cannot be contained or translated whole.

Creating such excesses of language constitutes one of the primary aims of Beckett’s trilogy and forms one of the main strategies by which it assays literature and its conventions. Molloy, for example, produces these excesses at the level of form. It opens, “I am in my mother’s room. It’s I who live there now. I don’t know how I got there.”³⁰⁹ By beginning this way, Molloy disallows in advance the possibility that his narration will come full circle and arrive back at the moment at which he started writing. His section of the novel, in fact, ends with him out in the woods somewhere, content to stay put: “Molloy could stay, where he happened to be.”³¹⁰ From this point on, he has to have reached his mother’s room, though he doesn’t remember how this happened, so his narrative remains open, formally, unable to enclose itself and assimilate the events that it purports to narrate. Moran, for his part, actually manages to narrate back to the point at which he begins to write, to bring his story full circle, but then he too introduces an excess that reopens his narrative and prevents its enclosure: “It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows,”³¹¹ he writes at the beginning of his section. After his long, fruitless search for Molloy, he returns home and ends the novel thus: “Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining.”³¹² His entire narrative immediately becomes suspect, the mere product of the

³⁰⁸ Knowlson, 601. Slote, 188. Slote provides a particularly incisive account of the untranslatability of “on” in Worstward Ho, as well as the special position that “on” occupies within Beckett’s *oeuvre*.

³⁰⁹ Beckett, Molloy, 7.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 176.

conventional form in which he casts it. For “what really happened,”³¹³ if one may speak of such things, must be sought elsewhere, as it exceeds the formal bounds within which Molloy and Moran try to assimilate it.

Such excesses abound in the novel. Molloy’s writing, for example, the very writing that will present itself to the reader in the pages that follow, appears from the beginning to be caught up in a system of circulation and exchange: Molloy expends himself in writing and receives monetary compensation; his expenditure returns to him for further expenditure, in revision; this expenditure eventually results in the production of a marketable commodity, the novel Molloy. Yet, Molloy insists, “I don’t work for money. For what then? I don’t know.” The pages that return to him for revision “are marked with signs I don’t understand. Anyway I don’t read them.”³¹⁴ Molloy nearly disrupts this system of circulation and exchange, as he expects no compensation for his writing; but this ends up being of little consequence, as he receives the compensation regardless of his expectation. More significantly, though, Molloy does not even read (let alone revise) the edited proofs that return to him each week. The editorial marks on the pages seek to communicate meaningful content to Molloy, who will then respond in kind by revising his pages and sending them back for further review, thereby continuing the circulation or communication of meaningful content. But Molloy cannot understand these editorial markings, nor does this seem to bother him. Their communication fails, and Molloy’s writing falls out of circulation. A pile of pages covered with meaningless marks steadily accumulates in Molloy’s room. These pages become pure expenditure, a waste—another version of the “work as detritus” theme inaugurated in Watt—insofar as they fail to compensate the editor’s

³¹³ Ibid., 88.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

expenditure or produce a finished, marketable commodity. They exceed the capacities of the closed system of circulation and exchange and seek a position outside of it through failure.

More significant, perhaps, are the occasions when Molloy reflects on language and the effects of its usage:

And then sometimes there arose within me, confusedly, a kind of consciousness, which I express...by means of other figures quite as deceitful, as for example, It seemed to me that, etc., or, I had the impression that, etc., for it seemed to me nothing at all, and I had no impression of any kind, but simply somewhere something had changed, so that I too had to change, or the world too had to change, in order for nothing to be changed. And it was these little adjustments, as between Galileo's vessels, that I can only express by saying, I feared that, or, I hoped that, or, Is that your mother's name? said the sergeant, for example, and that I might doubtless have expressed otherwise and better, if I had gone to the trouble.³¹⁵

Here, Molloy imagines the world as a succession of changes and language as an inadequate means that tries to compensate for or adjust to these changes in order to create a sense of stability, order, or—as Watt might say—comfort or relief from vexation. But “what really happened” exceeds this “deceitful” order by far and cannot be captured by such figures as, “It seemed to me that, etc., or, I had the impression that, etc.” To “[go] to the trouble” of finding or making an expression adequate to “what really happened” lies beyond Molloy's meager abilities in his weakened state. But, by acknowledging the unavoidable deception that his narrative has

³¹⁵ Ibid., 88.

enacted to this point, Molloy at least casts a critical eye on language as a form of habit whose boundaries are easily exceeded.

Malone Dies expresses these excesses of language perhaps more poignantly, if less pointedly, as Malone's impending death provides an occasion for him to reflect upon the forms of habit that have ordered his existence in the moment in which these begin to decay. The critical moment, in this regard, comes when Malone loses his stick. Up until this point, his stick, which has a sort of claw or hook on the end of it, has ordered the entire habitual web of sensory-motor relations that define his bed-ridden existence. The stick can reach the cart that transports his meals and his chamber pot between the bed and the door: "What matters is to eat and excrete."³¹⁶ The stick also reaches the piles of his possessions that lay strewn across the room. Malone attributes great importance to these piles: when he draws up his agenda of things to do as he waits for death, taking inventory of his possessions appears as the final task to be performed immediately before he dies. Only by exhaustively enumerating the objects and effects that he calls his own can he give an ordered account of his life; without the stick, he cannot perform this inventory, nor can he give his narrative the desired order. The loss of the stick, then, means more than the loss of possessions, more even than the loss of food or the chamber pot: it means the destruction of the habitual order that made Malone's room habitable. Just as Proust's narrator awakens in the middle of the night and, in a state of half-dreaming semi-consciousness, cannot determine whether he is lying in the bedroom of his childhood or that of his adult life until some external object or stimulus reactivates habit, orients his consciousness, and orders the room around him, so Malone finds himself unable to order his mind and take comfort without being able to reach the objects around him. "To restore silence is the role of objects," as Molloy

³¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, Malone Dies, Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, tr. by Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 185.

says, and Malone's loss of the stick ensures that he will enjoy such silence no more.³¹⁷ From this moment on, Malone's frequent narrative intrusions become fewer and farther between. Throughout the novel, Malone interrupts his stories with comments like, "What tedium,"³¹⁸ "This is awful,"³¹⁹ or "I have tried to reflect on the beginning of my story. There are things I do not understand,"³²⁰ all of which create and maintain a strict distinction between Malone's story and Malone as a narrator who can pause and reflect on the story that he narrates. Once he loses his stick, though, he begins to slip seamlessly, mid-paragraph, between his story and his commentary, whereas previously, story and commentary were always separated by a double-spaced paragraph break. He even inserts himself into the story momentarily, making himself a character capable of acting on the other characters in the story: "Moll. I'm going to kill her. She continued to look after Macmann, but she was no longer the same."³²¹ His narrative insertions gradually cease to act as interruptions that distinguish Malone from his story. Instead, once he has lost the habitual order that the stick creates, Malone begins to merge with his story. The hierarchical structure of Malone Dies—consisting of the "frame narrative" of Malone waiting for death, and the "story-within-the-story" that Malone narrates—dissipates, as these different levels of narration converge. The novel closes with the character Lemuel, from Malone's story, and the "I" that previously designated the narrator, Malone, blending together in an incoherent stream of language that visibly peters out on the page.³²² In this last moment, the words cease to articulate

³¹⁷ Molloy, 13.

³¹⁸ Malone Dies, 187.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 191.

³²⁰ Ibid., 189.

³²¹ Ibid., 264.

³²² Ibid., 288: "Lemuel is in charge, he raises his hatchet on which the blood will never dry, but not to hit anyone, he will not hit anyone, he will not hit anyone any more, he will not touch anyone any more, either with it or with it or with it or with or

or with it or with his hammer or with his stick or with his

a stable, habitual order that can sustain a narrator, a character, and the speech and actions of each, while keeping these things separate and in their proper relation to each other. Here, language exceeds the bounds of literary form, and the novel approaches the plurality of language that The Unnamable will assay in the pages that follow.

Like The Unnamable, the trilogy as a whole seeks these excesses of language not only at a thematic and formal level, but through self-translation as well; or, to be more precise, self-translation contributes to the formal pluralization of language in these novels. For example, Molloy opens his narration, after his prologue, differently in each language: “Cette fois-ci, puis encore une je pense, puis c’en sera finis je pense, de ce monde-là aussi. C’est le sens de l’avant-dernier” becomes “This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time, then I think it’ll be over, with that world too. Premonition of the last but one but one,”³²³ adding another iteration to account for the third novel in the series, which Beckett evidently hadn’t anticipated when initially writing the French Molloy. Furthermore, Molloy calls the two men that he watches on a stretch of road A and B in the French, A and C in the English. Such differences—like The Unnamable’s inversion of L’Innommable’s opening questions—immediately alert the reader to the fact that the English translation does not just copy the French novel, even if the English frequently translates the French about as literally as possible. From the beginning of the

fist or in thought in dream I mean never he will never

or with his pencil or with his stick or

or light light I mean

never there he will never

never anything

there

any more”

³²³ Molloy (Minuit), 8. Molloy (Grove), 8.

translation, Beckett announces Molloy's linguistic plurality, its status as a bilingual novel that operates in both languages simultaneously.

What is more, although many of these pluralities were clearly produced in translation, after the fact, as it were, some appear in the French but had to wait for the English translation to become visible. Thus, for example, amid the crass, vaudevillian comedy of the police officer's futile effort to interrogate Molloy in the street—he asks to see Molloy's papers, and Molloy produces a few scraps of toilet paper, etc.—Molloy halts suddenly and listens: “Il me sembla entendre, à un moment donné, une musique lointaine. Je m'arrêtai, pour mieux l'écouter.”³²⁴ The English version renders this passage almost word-for-word, without any suggestive changes: “I seemed to hear, at a certain moment, a distant music. I stopped, the better to listen.”³²⁵ Yet, for an Anglophone reader, the tableau created by Molloy's pregnant pause for “distant music” immediately calls to mind the climactic scene of Joyce's “The Dead,” as Gabriel Conroy prepares to leave the party and turns to find his wife, Greta, standing at the top of the stairs, listening raptly to the sad air that the tenor, Bartell D'Arcy, is singing in the adjacent drawing room. Gabriel thinks that he would like to paint her in this attitude and that he would call the painting Distant Music; and he is filled with a desire that will soon be devastated when he learns that a boy, now dead, with whom Greta had been in love long ago had once sung that song to her. The ironic allusion to such a poignant literary moment in the midst of Molloy's comedy heightens the farce, but only in the English version, as “une musique lointaine” would not likely resonate in the same way for a Francophone reader. And yet, “a distant music” translates “une musique lointaine” word-for-word—Beckett does not have to depart from a literal rendering to squeeze in the allusion—so it appears that he wrote “une musique lointaine” with the allusion

³²⁴ Molloy (Minuit), 26.

³²⁵ Molloy (Grove), 21.

already in mind, cast in a French written as though for Anglophone ears. Those same ears, in this context, could not help but hear, in “Je m’arrêterai,” not only the pun on “arrest” in the legal sense—after all, Molloy heightens the comedy of the scene still further by “arresting” himself at the precise moment that the police officer wants him to move on—but also the allusion to Stephen Dedalus’ aesthetic theory from the end of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (“You see I use the word *arrest*.”).³²⁶ Although the publication of the English Molloy created vast linguistic pluralities across both versions of the novel, it is also clear that such pluralities already existed in the French novel by itself, that it was already a bilingual novel—written in a French already diverging from the national language and culture of Racine, Voltaire, and Balzac, legible to a bilingual readership capable of hearing Anglophone allusions in French—before its fraternal twin ever appeared.³²⁷

The English Molloy, too, exceeds the boundaries of its language, not only by reflecting back upon and diverging from the French, but by alluding to the complex history of the English language and its culture. When Beckett renders “Les pleurs et les ris, je ne m’y connais guère” as “Tears and laughter, they are so much Gaelic to me,”³²⁸ for example, he does much more than just convey the sense of the original in a markedly English idiom that he had already exploited for this purpose before. Changing the idiom—substituting “Gaelic” for “Greek”—adds another layer of resonances: for, when an Irish-born writer has his Irish-named protagonist say, in English and in a recognizably English (if recognizably altered) idiom, “they are so much Gaelic to me”—where Gaelic stands in for Greek as the standard of incomprehensibility by which all

³²⁶ James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, ed. by R.B. Kershner (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 179.

³²⁷ Hill suggests that the title alone—an obviously Irish name on the cover of a novel written in French—suffices to announce the bilingual character of the French Molloy.

³²⁸ Beckett, Molloy (Minuit), 48. Molloy (Grove), 37.

other incomprehensible things are judged—this immediately evokes the history of English imperialism in Ireland, the forced repression of the Gaelic language, the subsequent efforts to recover and revive the language in the 19th and 20th centuries, and so on. Changing the idiom to evoke this painful history sets the novel against its own language, unsettles English’s normativity as a system of meaning, unveils the operations of power that produced that normativity, and thus delineates the historical and political stakes of writing in that language. Just as the French Molloy is, in many ways, a bilingual novel on its own, even before its translation, so too the translated Molloy rests uneasily in English—even when not read together with the French—and casts a critical eye towards its historical limits and conditions of possibility. The fact of translation only intensifies the novel’s sense of unease in its language: far from slipping comfortably from French into fluent, idiomatic English, the novel sustains a troubled relation with its languages by creating a new idiom that simultaneously belongs to English and critiques it, exceeding its limits and seeking a position outside it or between languages. Such instances show that the formal, thematic, and linguistic effort, in the trilogy, to exceed language’s limits and produce pluralities that take up a position between languages from which to critique both, forms a crucial part of a literary endeavor that targets and assays the relation between language and nation on the way to an international literature.

4.4 THE UNTRANSLATABLE

Beckett’s endeavor to disarticulate language and nation through translation and pluralization would prove to be career-long, and by the late ‘50s, he had added German translations of his

works to this effort.³²⁹ This made his achievement, in the early '80s, of a work of English prose that he deemed “untranslatable” all the more remarkable. He attempted a French translation of Worstward Ho but had to give up, citing (among other things) the impossibility of translating the opening preposition and pervasive refrain, “on.” Edith Fournier’s translation of the work, titled Cap au pire, renders this preposition as “encore,” which captures the repetition and continuity of “on,” but lacks its forward momentum.³³⁰ By this point, as we’ve seen, Beckett had already employed the phrase, “go on,” in translating a range of French words and phrases—including “continuer,” “avancez,” and “aller de l’avant”—which, taken together, come close to exhausting “on,” though none of them achieves this on its own. This translation history, in fact, forms part of the difficulty: in searching for a suitable word to render “on” in French, Beckett had not only to find the word that would exhaust all of its connotations in English, but he had to work against his own translation history, for “on” had acquired a considerable range of connotations *through* his own translations, such that it was already over-loaded with the semantic burden of his own French. In a sense, Beckett could not translate “on” from English to French, because his “on” was already between languages, already not entirely or exclusively English, already (as Sam Slote says) translated.³³¹ As with his work on Joyce’s hieroglyphic “Anna Livia Plurabelle,” the “futility of the translation” here stems (not only from Worstward Ho’s impossible syntax, but) from working with languages that have already disengaged, to some extent, from nation, national culture, and its literary public. And if, as Eliot claimed, “modern languages” express “national

³²⁹ Elmar Tophoven performed most of the German translations, often with Beckett’s assistance.

³³⁰ Beckett, Cap au pire, trans. by Edith Fournier (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1991). Fournier finished and published the translation after Beckett’s death.

³³¹ Slote, 197: “Worstward Ho is already a translated text. It is already disarticulated and it remarks its disarticulation by exploiting the possibilities latent with the word ‘on.’”

or racial differences of thought”³³² and represent the emergence and development of competing national cultures and literatures in Europe after Dante, then Beckett’s untranslatable English prose represents something other than a “modern language,” and it expresses a new culture and public whose consciousness emerges no longer at Dante’s nexus of language, literature, and nation, but elsewhere, between languages, *inter*-nationally, and perhaps—as we shall see in the next chapter—outside of literature.

³³² Eliot, Dante, 201.

5.0 TOWARDS A POST-LITERARY POESIS: TECHNOLOGY AND NEW MEDIA IN THE DRAMATIC WORKS

“It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. These two processes lead to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity.”

--Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”³³³

“I have no experience of studio work and it is naturally in the scenario and editing end of the subject that I am most interested. It is because I realise that the script is function of its means of realisation that I am anxious to make contact with your mastery of these, and beg you to consider me a serious cinéaste worthy of admission to your school.”

--Samuel Beckett, letter to Sergei Eisenstein, 2 March, 1936³³⁴

The preceding chapters have read Beckett’s formal experimentation with literary language and especially his deviation from national languages through self-translation as an effort to produce a new literary language that would ground the formation of a new literary public—since, as Erich Auerbach claimed, a “literary language” forms “the constituent prerequisite for the formation of

³³³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003): 254, emphasis in the original.

³³⁴ Samuel Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940, 317.

the social class that we have called the public and, it goes without saying, for the creation of a literature that requires such a public”³³⁵—in place of the decadent “ladies and gentlemen” whose outmoded tastes Beckett berates from the very beginning of his literary career. In doing so, these chapters have focused almost exclusively on Beckett’s prose fiction.

The dramatic works complicate this argument, however. In many ways, these works do continue the labor of the prose fiction, embodying the essayistic *ethos* that relentlessly tests and destroys the received conventions and forms of European literature, often experimenting with technological means and emerging technology-based media as ways of assaying the elements, conventions, and technologies specific to the theater, just as the prose fiction assays the written word: hence, Endgame’s relentless enumeration and exhaustion of the machinery of the theater, for example, or Didi and Gogo’s futile exhaustion of every conventional means of ending in Godot. But each of these genres bears its own particular problematics and characteristics that should prevent us from treating the dramatic works as a mere extension of the prose. Whereas the prose fiction assails the written word from all angles but cannot, finally, be rid of it, the dramatic works still have silence, movement, and mute gesture at their disposal: “Breath” and the pantomime, “Act Without Words II,” for example, both operate entirely without language.³³⁶ Whereas, conversely, the dramatic works have to contend with the actual presence of human bodies on stage, the prose fiction frequently dissipates the body amid the stream of words, such that the body’s presence appears as an effect of the figures of language that constitute it: compare, for example, the lengths to which “Not I” goes to dissuade the audience from thinking that the mouth that speaks belongs to a body, with The Unnamable, in which it is neither

³³⁵ Auerbach, Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, 248.

³³⁶ “Act Without Words I” includes a bucket that has “WATER” written on its side, so it does not entirely escape language.

necessary nor even particularly plausible to imagine that the stream of language on the page emanates from a human voice, let alone a body. Despite their frequent thematic and even methodological similarities, then, it would be inadequate to subject both genres of Beckett's *oeuvre* to the same analysis. Beckett's experimentation with new media—radio, film, television—throughout his career as a dramatist heightens this inadequacy all the more, since, I will argue, these plays' reliance on their respective media introduces further elements that are unsusceptible to conventional literary analysis.

Such differences in the various problematics that occupy each genre suggest a more pervasive difference between the two major divisions of Beckett's work and the undertakings specific to each: while the prose fiction assays language on the way to a new literary language that articulates a post-national literary public in the wake of European modernity, the dramatic works' experimentation with technology and new media explores the transformation in art, literature, and the public enacted by these technologies and assays the concomitant possibilities of a post-literary poesis and a post-literary public. This final chapter will scrutinize Beckett's dramatic works, paying particular attention to the media plays (those composed for radio, film, and television), in order to evaluate Beckett's effort to imagine forms of poesis and a public—a class of people capable of cultivating and elaborating culture—in the wake of literature's dominance as the bearer of culture.

5.1 A NON-LITERARY PUBLIC

The very idea of a post-literary poesis and public implies not only that the advent of new technologies and their application in art has transformed the very nature of art and its attendant

modes of perception, but that this transformation has also affected social relations and the formation of the public as they pertain to the work of art and tradition. The significance of Walter Benjamin's famous essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" lies in its recognition and analysis of both of these aspects. The technological reproducibility of the work of art and the emergence of new forms of art designed specifically to be reproduced—such as photography and film—Benjamin says, have fundamentally altered the way that the work is received, as well as its social function. Benjamin argues that the technological reproduction of the work of art destroys its "aura"—its "here and now," its "unique existence...that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject"³³⁷—which he figures as a kind of distance between the work and its audience: the work's authenticity, or the unique history that separates it from all other objects, surrounds it with a kind of mystique that attaches to the object itself, but not to any reproduction of it. Because of this aura, people will travel great distances to see the authentic Mona Lisa, even if they already know what it looks like from prints or other reproductions that are readily available to them without any significant expenditure of time or money, but which are considered intrinsically worthless by comparison, since they do not possess the aura of the original.³³⁸ This sense of the work's "aura" does not obtain in the case of photography or film: "From a photographic plate, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense."³³⁹ The fact that the photograph is meant to be reproduced endlessly, with no loss of authenticity, diminishes the historical uniqueness of the work as object or artifact. One of the immediate effects of this destruction of the aura, then, lies in the erasure of the distance that separates the work from its

³³⁷ Benjamin, 253.

³³⁸ It goes without saying that the internet has made such images or reproductions eminently accessible, such that one can access the Mona Lisa on a phone or device that one carries around in her pocket.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 256.

recipients: for, while there is only one authentic Mona Lisa, and one may have to travel a great distance and pay admission to stand in its presence, anyone can own a copy of a photograph, and anyone can watch a film or listen to a symphony in his own living room. The work becomes available to a much broader public, including those who would not previously have considered themselves as participants in cultural life. Thus, the advent of new technologies of reproduction in art produces a concomitant transformation in the nature and composition of its public.

One of the more profound effects of the destruction of the work's aura through technological reproducibility, however, is the upheaval of the received cultural tradition that it enacts. Since the work's aura encapsulates "all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it,"³⁴⁰ its destruction disrupts the work's relation to tradition or its embeddedness within a particular history and social context:

It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. These two processes lead to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity.³⁴¹

Benjamin finds great critical value in this "shattering of tradition," since the work of art's aura, the sense of distance that indexes its unique historical existence but also separates it from the

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 254.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 254, emphasis in the original.

observer, has its origin in “cult value,” that is, the work’s use for religious, ritualistic, or magical purposes. Certain frescoes and statues in medieval cathedrals, for example, are not visible to observers at ground level, since they were not made to be exhibited before human eyes, but to serve a particular religious function towards the greater glory of God. That is, their ritual function or “cult value” diminishes their accessibility to human observers and, thus, their “exhibition value.” Indeed, Benjamin posits a spectrum on which “cult value” and “exhibition value” form the opposing poles:³⁴² the greater the cult value, the less the exhibition value, as in the case of the above frescoes; conversely, the greater the exhibition value, the less the cult value, and the work of art in the age of technological reproducibility may perhaps best be characterized by the emphasis that it places on exhibition value, which is evident in the ease with which the work “reach[es] the recipient in his or her own situation.” This shift in emphasis towards exhibition value, then, contributes to the destruction of the work’s aura by freeing art from its subservience to cult value or ritual. The transformation of the work of art by the technology of reproduction, thus, serves a critical function that purges outdated, cult-based concepts of art—“such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery,”³⁴³—and paves the way, Benjamin argues, for the development of a revolutionary aesthetic. This “revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art”³⁴⁴ comes, however, at the expense of a “massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past”—the disruption of the seamless legibility of an aesthetic tradition whose continuity and historical cohesiveness were guaranteed, Benjamin claims, by its dependence on cult value—but this upheaval, this destruction of tradition, permits the emergence of a new public that can access the work of art without the

³⁴² Ibid., 257.

³⁴³ Ibid., 252.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 261.

restrictions of cult-based institutions or the mystique of authenticity. In this way, the “shattering of tradition” enacted by the emergence of technologically reproducible art “is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity.”

Benjamin castigates early critics of cinema who, unwilling to concede to this “upheaval” and “renewal,” tried to maintain the seamless legibility of the tradition even in the face of this crisis. These critics tried to assimilate this new technology into existing aesthetic theories by speaking of film as a kind of hieroglyphics or sacred art; and, while this comparison may well express the technology’s primitivism, in Vico’s sense—the way that it institutes new beginnings and new ways of thinking—it figures the technology as a new kind of *language* and associates the film as object with the kind of cult or ritual value that the medium had rendered obsolete. Benjamin argues that such critics misjudge entirely the transformation in art, perception, and the public that coincides with the emergence of these new technologies of reproduction. Yet, many early critics of Beckett’s media plays—even those who actually tried to account for the significance of the plays’ media³⁴⁵—misapprehend this transformation in the same way. Enoch Brater, for example, writes of Beckett’s television plays, Nacht und Träume and Quad:

Writing with the basic material of television, video images, Beckett makes us sense the verbal potential of all that he renders so palpably visual. The medium of television requires another kind of lyrical language here, a spatial and temporal one, for its most effective means of communication. The video image says more precisely because it says less, and in saying less it says everything in the way this

³⁴⁵ See Linda Ben-Zvi, “Samuel Beckett’s Media Plays,” Modern Drama 28.1 (March 1985): 22-37. Ben-Zvi indicates that, even as late as the early 1980s, relatively few critics of Beckett’s dramatic works paid much attention to the media plays, and those few who did based their criticism on “readings” of the written texts. Such limitations, Ben-Zvi argues, prevented those critics from adequately considering the “shaping presence of the medium itself” (23).

medium can be made to say it. It is the camera that provides punctuation and emphasis here.³⁴⁶

For Brater, the visual images and the machinery that comprise “the basic material of television” constitute another way of “saying,” a new kind of “lyrical language” in which the visual suggests a “verbal potential,” and the camera “provides punctuation.” In a word (pun intended), Brater figures television as merely a different kind of literature. Linda Ben-Zvi tries more arduously to account for “the shaping presence of the medium itself”³⁴⁷ in Beckett’s media works, but her analysis of the radio play, All That Fall, nonetheless falls back on one of the stock-in-trade claims of literary humanism, as she finds in this work “a new radio form—or theatre—that approximates the mysteries of life.”³⁴⁸ The mystique of authenticity and the cult-based reverence that establish an aura for the work remain palpable here. Furthermore, Ben-Zvi claims that “the metaphysical situation is consistent in almost all Beckett’s works,”³⁴⁹ including All That Fall, and she thereby suggests that the technology of radio may be treated as only a different means by which Beckett achieves the same ends as his prose works, ends that remain consistent with those of the entire tradition of literary humanism in Europe; and, in subordinating the effects of All That Fall’s form and medium to this supposed “metaphysical situation,” Ben-Zvi makes the work legible to that tradition and its public.

But Beckett was never concerned with the public’s comprehension of his dramatic works, at least not in a conventional sense. He made this quite clear in the fierce debates surrounding the first English production of Play by the National Theatre Company in London: Kenneth

³⁴⁶ Enoch Brater, “Toward a Poetics of Television Technology: Beckett’s Nacht und Träume and Quad,” Modern Drama 28.1 (March 1985): 51.

³⁴⁷ Ben-Zvi, 23.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

Tynan, the company's literary manager, and William Gaskill (supported, mostly in absentia, by the company's artistic director, Sir Laurence Olivier) demanded that Beckett and director George Devine reduce the rapid-fire pace of the work's dialogue for the sake of intelligibility, while the latter two insisted that this pace was crucial to the play's effect and must be maintained regardless of—indeed, *because of*—its deleterious effects on the audience's comprehension.³⁵⁰ The entire situation and *mise en scène* of Play aim, in fact, at disrupting sense, intelligibility, and the ideal of “imitation of action” that has been the highest desideratum of the theater since Aristotle. The three actors appear on stage as disembodied heads in urns. They do not interact with, acknowledge, look at, or gesture towards each other. They must either kneel inside/behind the urns or have their height reduced by the use of trap doors in the stage, in either case preventing the audience from assessing their true heights and assuming that a full body adjoins the head.³⁵¹ The actors deliver their lines at a pace that strains or even prohibits comprehension: Devine instructed his actors that “the words did not convey thoughts or ideas but were simply ‘dramatic ammunition’ to be uttered.”³⁵² The play includes a *da capo* repeat—flouting whatever sense of narrative continuity might remain—with a variation of the director's choosing. One of the suggested variations increases the pace of speech and adds a “breathless quality” to the enunciation that further obscures intelligibility.³⁵³ The sequence in which the lines are delivered does not follow a recognizable chronology or narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, nor does the sequence operate according to the logic of conversation, as the characters neither address nor respond to each other; and, in any case, the second iteration frequently alters this

³⁵⁰ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 459-460.

³⁵¹ Samuel Beckett, *Play*, *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centary Edition, Vol. 3*, 367. In addition to Beckett's customary, highly-detailed stage directions at the beginning of the play, this work also includes additional extended notes on both the urns and the light.

³⁵² Knowlson, 459. Knowlson suggests that the phrase, “dramatic ammunition,” was Beckett's own that he used frequently in conversations with Devine.

³⁵³ Beckett, *Play*, 368. The final printed page of the work outlines four suggested variations for the repeat.

sequence, thereby further dissociating the lines spoken from the imitation of action for an audience's comprehension.³⁵⁴ Rather, what animates the talking heads in urns, what determines the sequence of lines uttered, and what generally organizes the structure and the space of the work is the single spotlight located at the front of the stage that shines seemingly without reason on each of the heads in turn. The head speaks when illuminated and remains silent when cast in darkness, entirely in thrall to the inhuman logic of the apparatus that organizes the play; Beckett's stage directions even refer to the actors as the light's "victims."³⁵⁵ This light shifts its focus arbitrarily, without regard for narrative order, and it often shifts mid-sentence, without regard even for grammatical order. Its almost instantaneous jumps from one head to another create a fragmentary effect that mimics the cinematic montage and further disrupts the sense of continuous presence on stage. There can be no question of intelligibility, not only in the sense that the audience frequently cannot make out the actors' utterances: the very conventions of dramatic intelligibility—the presence of bodies performing actions on stage, narrative continuity, plot-driven dialogue—have been disrupted, and the play has been reorganized around the machinery that usually only serves as a prop or a means.

We might think of Play, in this sense, as an earlier assay of the technological problem that occupies Film, conceived for the stage. Indeed, Beckett composed these works within a year of each other, and each is titled according to its medium, as if to suggest that each work serves as a study, critique, or quintessential representation of the medium itself.³⁵⁶ Accordingly, each work subordinates plot, character, dialogue (where applicable: Film is almost entirely silent), and

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 368. The fourth suggested variation alters the "order of speeches."

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 366. The location and operation of the spotlight form the greatest obstacles to staging Play. Beckett's extensive notes on the light makes certain allowances to the exigencies of individual productions, but he insists on keeping the light separate from the space of the audience; i.e., the spotlight cannot shine onto the stage from behind the audience.

³⁵⁶ Beckett wrote Play in 1962-63, and it was first produced in German (as Spiel) in June of 1963. He wrote the first draft of shooting notes for Film in April 1963. See Ackerley and Gontarski, 193 and 443.

the imitation of action to the machinery that constitutes and organizes the medium: just as the heads in Play are both terrorized and animated by the stage machinery that condemns them to repeat their lines unintelligibly in a purgatory whose organization is mechanical rather than moral, so the “protagonist” or object of the camera’s perception in Film (“O” for object) assays the problem of how to escape this perception, or how to become imperceptible to the mechanical eye whose perception forms the condition of existence itself within the medium. That is to say, the primary conflict of Film pertains directly to the machinery of film itself.

By foregrounding the technology of the medium—to the detriment of plot, character, dialogue, and every other convention of dramatic intelligibility—however, Film actually begins to establish an alternative intelligibility that is immanent to the medium and its constitutive technology. Although Beckett’s notes for the scenario begin in familiar conceptual and thematic territory, they soon turn to assay a series of technological problems:

Esse est percipi.

All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being.

Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception.

No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience.³⁵⁷

While it might appear that these notes outline a philosophical program or an underlying message that the film conveys, Beckett immediately makes it clear that this program is itself the device or the means, “of merely structural or dramatic convenience,” that conveys the film, not the other

³⁵⁷ Samuel Beckett, Film, Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Vol. 3, 371.

way around. It serves as the first of two “dramatic convenience[s],” each of which aims to render intelligible a formal aspect of the film that otherwise defies conceptual or linguistic comprehension. In this case, this program provides a convenient and familiar way of conceiving of the central problem of the film, which is essentially formal and technological, rather than conceptual: how to escape the camera’s perception, which perception is itself the condition of the medium’s existence. The second such “convenience,” the scene with the old couple in the street, serves no plot purpose in the film and is entirely “undefendable *except* as a dramatic convenience”³⁵⁸ that establishes a protocol of intelligibility. E (or “eye,” which is the pursuing camera’s perspective) turns its attention towards the old couple, after O has jostled them in his flight from E; when the couple, in its turn, notices E’s attention—indicated by the close-up, head-on shot of the couple’s faces—the actors adopt an expression for which words prove inadequate, “an expression only to be described as corresponding to an agony of perceivedness.”³⁵⁹ The couple puts on and takes off their respective spectacles—pince-nez for the man, a *lorgnon* for the woman—thus emphasizing the importance of visual perception and further suggesting that such perception is, in fact, the stimulus to which they respond with the indescribable expression. The ensuing scene in the stairwell with the old woman repeats and reinforces this connection between the close-up shot of the face and a particular facial expression (“same expression as that of couple in street”³⁶⁰). Together, these scenes establish a pattern or protocol, such that, in the final scene in the room, when E finally confronts O head-on, we know

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 378, emphasis added.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 373.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 374.

what to expect from O: “that look.”³⁶¹ Thus, Protocol 1: close-up of the face→“that look,” a horror or anguish consequent upon being perceived by E.

The second protocol of intelligibility inaugurated in the street scene with the old couple pertains to creating a second perspective, O's, that can be *formally* distinguished from E's. Beckett's notes call this “the chief problem of the film,”³⁶² from a technical standpoint; indeed, establishing a protocol that allows the audience to distinguish between O's and E's perspectives is absolutely essential to making intelligible the climactic scene, where each looks at the other full in the face, and O realizes with horror that he perceives himself. Beginning with the street scene, once O jostles the couple, the film cuts abruptly from the initial perspective—the camera positioned behind O, never more than 45 degrees towards his front, so as to remain undiscovered in its pursuit—to a closer perspective on the couple, stationary, shot from where we just saw O standing. What's more, this second perspective is distorted, shot through a lens-gauze, so that it is visually distinct from the previous shot, as though seen through different eyes. The couple looks into the camera with a mixture of confusion and disgust commensurate with the circumstance of being run into by a bum on the street; their expression, here, never approaches “that look.” The perspective cuts abruptly again, back to the original position and visual clarity; then, the camera moves in on the couple to elicit “that look.” Thus, the film has established two separate perspectives, each with its own formal characteristics and conventions. They may be distinguished not only by their respective positions—the first perspective (E) following O at no more than a 45 degree angle, the second perspective (O) shot from where we have already seen O standing—but by the quality of their perception, the response that their perception elicits, and also by their movements: E's perception is clear, O's is distorted by the lens-gauze; E's

³⁶¹ Ibid., 377.

³⁶² Ibid., 379.

perception elicits “that look,” O’s does not; E’s perspective tracks and follows O over time, O’s perspective is always stationary and held just long enough to produce a static tableau. Here, again, the scene in the stairwell repeats these distinctions and establishes them as a protocol: E’s perspective remains behind O, perceives without the lens-gauze, elicits “that look” from the old woman, and tracks forward to follow O when he escapes up the staircase; O’s perspective is represented by a low-angle shot that looks up the stairs at the old woman from a position where we have just seen O crouching, the shot is distorted by the lens-gauze, it doesn’t elicit “that look,” and it remains stationary for the brief moment that the shot persists. Thus, Protocol 2: E’s and O’s perspectives will be distinguishable by differences in camera position, visual clarity, actor response to perception, and camera movement.

By the time E and O enter the room for the film’s crucial (and by far longest) scene, then, Film has already taught its audience how to watch and interpret it; that is to say, it has *cultivated* a viewership or a public that can understand it. And, although Beckett deliberately ran roughshod over the intelligibility of language and the received conventions of the theater in Play, he exhibits great concern regarding the intelligibility of Film’s protocols: he devotes the longest note of the scenario to puzzling over the difficulty of distinguishing between E’s and O’s perspectives and producing “for the spectator a *clear apprehension* of either.”³⁶³ Certainly, this concern for the spectator and for the clarity of his or her apprehension differentiates Film from any of Beckett’s works for the stage or in prose, where the essayistic *ethos* of the fidelity to failure relentlessly assails the received forms and conventions of literary intelligibility; and it emphasizes Beckett’s effort to create new protocols of intelligibility specific to this work and its medium, protocols that summon and articulate a cultured public whose material bases are non-

³⁶³ Ibid., 379, emphasis added.

literary, even non-linguistic. This public does not emerge through the articulation and cultivation of a “literary language,” as Auerbach said of the public of the late Empire, but rather through the destruction of the forms of intelligibility belonging to literature and the theater, and the creation of new forms specific to the cinema.

Beckett’s cinematic public must be distinguished, however, from the distracted masses that Benjamin identified as the audience for cinema, primarily because Beckett’s Film addresses itself not to general audiences, but to a more exclusive group of viewers. Indeed, Benjamin even acknowledges, for his own part, that the film industry of the late ‘30s produced little of revolutionary value for mass consumption: “So long as moviemakers’ capital sets the fashion, as a rule the only revolutionary merit that can be ascribed to today’s cinema is the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art.”³⁶⁴ As early as 1936—three years before the last version of Benjamin’s essay and nearly thirty years before Film—Beckett imagined that the introduction of sound and color into cinema would alter the art of the medium in a way that would permit the cultivation of an experimental cinema distinct from the big studio films produced for mass consumption:

It is interesting that Becky Sharp in colour, which I think had a long run in London, was a complete flop here and was taken off at the Savoy after three days & not transferred to any other house. That does not encourage my hope that the industrial film will become so completely naturalistic, in stereoscopic colour & gramophonic sound, that a back water may be created for the two-dimensional silent film that had barely emerged from its rudiments when it was swamped.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 261.

Then there would be two separate things and no question of a fight between them
or rather of a rout.³⁶⁵

Of course, as it turned out, sound and color did, in fact, profoundly affect the “industrial film” and its naturalism, Becky Sharp’s fate in Dublin notwithstanding,³⁶⁶ and, although Beckett would later decry the early death of cinema as a result of these developments (“The cinema was killed in the cradle and if ever there is an Elijah to throw himself down on the corpse I won’t be there to profit by it.”³⁶⁷), they did produce the necessary separation between the industrial film and the “two-dimensional silent film” that would permit the cultivation of the desired “back water” for experimentation with the latter. Beckett’s Film may be viewed as an effort to produce such a back water and to elaborate the possibilities inherent in the silent film. For, although Film develops its own protocols of intelligibility and thus the necessary means to understand it, it nonetheless presumes from the outset an audience already versed in and receptive to the silent film and its conventions, an audience that would have been dwindling by the early ‘60s; that is, a somewhat exclusive audience, distinct from the general movie-going public. Film addresses itself to this more select audience and deliberately alienates the general public by eschewing the conventional devices of naturalistic cinema common to the industrial film, including both color and sound: the lone “Shhh!” serves no other purpose than to indicate that sound remains possible but has been purposefully excluded. Beckett’s scenario notes call for a “Climate of film comic and unreal,”³⁶⁸ which Film’s director, Alan Schneider, expounds as “Sam’s feeling that the film

³⁶⁵ Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940, 311-312. Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 6 February, 1936.

³⁶⁶ The editors of the Letters suggest that Beckett was mistaken anyway and that, other than a negative review in The Irish Times, Dublin received Becky Sharp quite warmly. It played to “record audiences” in January 1936. *Ibid.*, 314-315.

³⁶⁷ Samuel Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941-1956, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 629. Letter to H.O. White, 2 July, 1956.

³⁶⁸ Beckett, Film, 378.

should possess a slightly stylized comic reality akin to that of a silent movie.”³⁶⁹ The choice of Buster Keaton to play O (when Charlie Chaplin proved predictably unavailable) reinforces the allusion to the familiar atmosphere of the silent film: Schneider even recalls a showing of Film as part of a Keaton revival at the 1965 New York Film Festival, in which the audience “of critics and students of film-technique”—those capable of recognizing the film’s atmosphere—burst out laughing at the first sight of Keaton on the screen, in anticipation of the usual slapstick antics that they were about to be (mostly) denied.³⁷⁰ Film does deliver the requisite dog-and-cat routine, however, which once again places the seasoned viewer in familiar cinematic territory; and, what’s more, the entire dramatic scenario—O’s flight from and final confrontation with E’s perception—is figured visually as a chase sequence, a trope familiar even to less discerning viewers, but one that may be created entirely without sound, relying exclusively on montage editing techniques for its suspense and intelligibility.

Film requires an audience that understands these techniques—which, for Beckett, had defined the burgeoning medium before it was “swamped”—in order to learn Film’s protocols of intelligibility without linguistic intervention. These techniques had, in Beckett’s view, been assayed most fruitfully by the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s, who pioneered and advanced the theory and practice of montage or “constructive editing.” Beckett’s admiration for these filmmakers is evident in the 1936 letter cited above, wherein he expresses the desire to study cinema “under a person like Pudovkin,” from whom he would learn “how to handle a camera, the higher trucs of the editing bench, & so on.”³⁷¹ Furthermore, his complaints about the art of cinema being destroyed in its infancy by the “naturalism” of the “industrial film” echo

³⁶⁹ Alan Schneider, “On Directing Film,” in Samuel Beckett, Film (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 66.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 629.

Pudovkin's concerns in Film Technique.³⁷² And, perhaps most tellingly, he wrote to Sergei Eisenstein a month later requesting admission into the Moscow State School of Cinematography, citing his own understanding "that the script is function of its means of realisation" as evidence that he should be considered "a serious cinéaste."³⁷³ This aversion to the naturalism of the industrial film, together with his appreciation for the silent film and his general understanding of the constitutive part that the medium, its technologies, and its machinery—in a word, the film's "means of realisation"—play in the production of cinematic intelligibility defined an orientation or attitude towards the cinema, its audience, and its possibilities that would inform Film three decades later. This attitude forms the characteristic trait of the non-literary public that Film articulates, a public that shares a particular grounding or formation in the medium, that appreciates the constructive effects of cinematography and editing, and that can learn and cultivate the non-linguistic protocols of intelligibility—distinct from a literary language—that Film establishes as its necessary conditions for viewing and understanding.

5.2 DISEMBODIED VOICES

The years intervening between Beckett's March 1936 letter to Eisenstein and his realization of Film in 1964 transformed his life and literary career entirely: he departed for Germany six months after writing to Eisenstein, in September of '36, and wrote the famous "German Letter" to Axel Kaun, announcing a "literature of the unword," the following July; Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 sparked the Second World War, which uprooted Beckett's life in Paris and

³⁷² V.I. Pudovkin, Film Technique, trans. by Igor Montagu (London: George Newnes, 1933).

³⁷³ Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940, 317.

forced him to live on the run, during which time he participated in the Resistance and wrote Watt; immediately following the war, he wrote the works—Waiting For Godot and the novel trilogy—on which his international fame and critical reputation primarily rest; and, beginning in 1956, he started experimenting with radio. This marked his first excursion into a non-literary medium, and he stumbled upon it basically by accident, as an unintended consequence of Waiting for Godot's sudden fame: the BBC wanted to broadcast a version of Godot, and, when Beckett declined, they asked him to write a new work for radio. Nonetheless, this unanticipated opportunity opened a path that would lead to future work and experimentation in film and television as well. Although he professed his ignorance regarding radio—"My ideas about radio are not even quarter baked"³⁷⁴—he displayed an immediate aptitude for the medium and an acute understanding of its constitutive elements and limitations; and he wrote a series of increasingly experimental radio plays between 1956 and 1964, leading up to his lone foray into film, after which, he never wrote for the radio again.³⁷⁵

The transition from radio to film seems a strange one, almost a complete *non sequitur*, given the vast differences between the technologies and what they devote their attention to. While Film is almost completely silent and relies exclusively on visual cues to create its protocols of intelligibility, the radio plays consist only of sound with no corresponding visual element whatsoever. In a way, the radio plays seem closer to the prose fiction—from Molloy to the Texts for Nothing—than to Film, if only because the radio's restriction to sound alone means that it tends to rely on the voice to convey meaning and action; and, in fact, in addition to the plays that he wrote specifically for radio, Beckett also allowed the BBC to broadcast a number of

³⁷⁴ The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941-1956, 688. Letter to Donald McWhinnie, 18 December 1956.

³⁷⁵ He did, however, permit some of his other prose works and stage plays to be broadcast on the radio well after Film. Rough For Radio, a sketch for a radio drama dating back to the early '60s, was not produced by the BBC until 1976.

readings from his prose works, including the trilogy, whose first-person narration and stream-of-consciousness-sounding style lent itself well to being read aloud as a monologue. But, despite these differences, Beckett employed these two technologies—radio and film—to complementary ends, and I will argue that his work with radio laid the necessary groundwork for his film, separating the voice from the body and stripping the former of its privileged role in the production of dramatic intelligibility.

Beckett's first play for radio, All That Fall, appears to be uncharacteristically naturalistic in a number of ways, as it contains not only a sizable cast of believable characters who engage each other in everyday conversation, but also a realistic setting in Beckett's native Ireland, and a fairly plausible plot line: Mrs. Rooney travels to the station to meet her husband, whose train has been delayed because a child fell onto the tracks. But each of these elements seems to be incidental, at best, a mere device subordinated to the "background" sounds that drive the play. Indeed, these sounds were primary at the play's inception, as Beckett revealed to Nancy Cunard: "Never thought about Radio play technique but in the dead of t'other night got a gruesome idea full of cartwheels and dragging feet and puffing and panting which may or may not lead to something."³⁷⁶ And, once production got under way, Beckett's most pressing concern from the outset was the "rather special quality of bruitage" that the play would require.³⁷⁷ Even the play's requisite animal sounds proved a technological difficulty, since Beckett and director Donald McWhinnie could not agree on how best to render these sounds as *unrealistically* as possible: McWhinnie wanted human actors to imitate the animal noises, while Beckett preferred

³⁷⁶ The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941-1956, 631. Letter to Nancy Cunard, 4 July, 1956.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 656. Letter to John Morris, 27 September, 1956. This is the letter with which Beckett submitted the script of All That Fall to the BBC. It is evident, from the very beginning, that Beckett was worried about getting the sounds right. He even offers to send a supplementary note explaining in greater detail the kinds of sounds that he wanted.

recordings of actual animals “distorted by some technical means.”³⁷⁸ For both, however, denaturalizing these sounds in an obvious way, calling attention to them, and thus bringing them from the play’s background to its foreground, remained the highest priority. By comparison, the main “action” of the play—Mrs. Rooney’s laborious journey to and from the train station—seems to be a mere convenience or a means, an occasion to showcase these and other sound effects. The heavy dragging of Mrs. Rooney’s feet dominates the play—so much that she and her husband have to stop walking to deliver their lines audibly—and the side episode with Mr. Slocum seems to serve no other purpose than to inundate the audience with the “puffing and panting” that attends the effort to get Mrs. Rooney in and out of his car. In this episode especially, the sounds that comprise the scene are suggestive double *entendres*: Mrs. Rooney’s and Mr. Slocum’s dialogue is full of innuendo (“I’m coming, Mrs. Rooney, I’m coming, give me time, I’m as stiff as yourself.” “Stiff! Well I like that! And me heaving all over back and front.”³⁷⁹) that, when combined with the “puffing and panting,” suggests a comically pornographic scene no less than what is *supposed* to be happening; only by referring to the broader context of the plot can the listener determine which of the two scenes *heard* is the “correct” one, the one to be visualized. The play is replete with such gags and double *entendres*, as it positively revels in a medium that is entirely *entendu*. Sometimes, the play deliberately “points up” what the audience cannot see, as when Mr. Tyler repeatedly directs Miss Fitt’s attention to a specific point in the distance:

Mr. Tyler: Then you have no cause for anxiety, Miss Fitt, for the twelve thirty
 has not yet arrived. Look. [*Miss Fitt looks.*] No, up the line.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 687-688. Letter to Donald McWhinnie, 18 December 1956. McWhinnie ultimately prevailed in this matter.

³⁷⁹ Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall*, *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition*, Vol. 3, 164.

[*Miss Fitt looks. Patiently.*] No, Miss Fitt, follow the direction of my index. [*Miss Fitt looks.*] There. You see now. The signal.³⁸⁰

The comedy extends even to the stage directions, which cannot be performed on the radio in any recognizable way; “*Patiently*” is hilarious, in this context, though it’s a joke that only readers will see. At other times, the characters reveal that their presence is comprised entirely of sound, as when Mrs. Rooney, who had been silent for a few lines, interrupts a conversation to interject, “Do not imagine, because I am silent, that I am not present, and alive, to all that is going on.”³⁸¹ Few attentive listeners would have assumed that a character who had not spoken in a short while but who had not exited either would have ceased to exist, of course, but the suggestion that the audience *could* have thought that reveals that the characters’ presence within the play—the actors’ physical presence in the studio being irrelevant here, especially in the case of a prerecorded program—is a function of sound alone. Mrs. Rooney, in this moment, gives the lie to the assumed naturalism of the radio play as form, that is, the assumption that the sounds broadcast over the airwaves correspond to an actual scene, characters, and actions being performed elsewhere but invisibly, as though the audience sits before a stage play but listens with its eyes closed. Instead, All That Fall’s repeated gags and double *entendres* reveal that the medium of transmission actually alters the very conditions of dramatic presence itself and that in radio, in particular, the sounds broadcast do not necessarily signal a corresponding presence elsewhere.

If All That Fall achieves this effect primarily through comic negation—palpably demonstrating to the audience what it cannot see and must, of necessity, only infer from sound alone—Beckett’s next radio play, Embers, is more constructive in its approach. Rather than

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 173.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 172.

comically showing what the medium cannot do, it seizes upon what it *can* do and produces effects that cannot be achieved on the stage or on screen. Specifically, it creates a hallucinatory atmosphere that seems to be set in the mind of the protagonist, Henry, constructing through sounds an interiority or imaginative space that has no visual correlate. Thus, the play's atmosphere is filled with strange, sometimes indecipherable sounds that are subject to Henry's whims and explanations. The roaring sea, the sea that took his father's life long ago, for example, remains audible throughout, especially during pauses in speech, but it sounds unnatural, so much so, in fact, that Henry has to direct the listener to interpret the sound a particular way:

That sound you hear is the sea. [*Pause. Louder.*] I say that sound you hear is the sea, we are sitting on the strand. [*Pause.*] I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was you wouldn't know what it was.³⁸²

This unnatural sound—represented in the original BBC production by the crescendos and decrescendos of an organ *continuo*—thus, becomes “the sea” by fiat. Henry calls other sounds into and out of existence as well—a horse's hooves, drips of water, even characters in an imaginary scene that he conjures up to distract himself from the roar of the sea—in a way that completely forecloses any possibility of naturalistic representation and suggests that these sounds are interior projections of Henry's imagination.

More significantly, however, Beckett's arrangement of these sounds obliterates any sense that the play is set in a conceivable or visualizable *external* space, as it juxtaposes, in rapid sequence and without transition, sounds that belong to disparate places. As Henry and his wife,

³⁸² Samuel Beckett, *Embers*, Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Vol. 3, 197.

Ada, discuss the whereabouts of their daughter, Addie, for example, Henry mentions her music and riding lessons, and the critical voice first of Addie's music teacher and then of her riding instructor sounds immediately, without transition to reorient the listener to a new location, even though neither should be present in the same (or even adjoining) physical space as Henry and Ada. These "scenes" of music and riding instruction each escalate phantasmagorically to an abrupt halt—"amplified to paroxysm, then suddenly cut off,"³⁸³ the directions stipulate, thus heightening the play's hallucinatory atmosphere—and then return us directly to Henry and Ada's dialogue, again without pause or any other device that indicates movement to a separate space. It thus seems that these sounds occupy the same space, or even that the play operates entirely without space; alternatively, we might think of these sounds as belonging to Henry's imagination, which comprises the only "space"—albeit an intangible one—in which these disparate voices might be made to adjoin in this way. The radio allows Beckett to create, dramatically, this interior imaginative medium, precisely because it contains no visual element. Whereas dramatic works for the theater begin with the external, physical space of the stage and have to disguise it or rely on other devices to convince the audience that it is somehow "looking" into a mind, as though a mind were a place, Embers begins with sounds whose position in space remain unspecified. Rather than using these sounds to construct a visualizable space or spaces and thus "compensate" for what radio drama inherently lacks—in the way that, for example, the constant, laborious sound of Mrs. Rooney's dragging feet in All That Fall creates the sense of a great distance traversed—Embers eschews space altogether. That is, Beckett juxtaposes voices successively in time, rather than adjacently in space, and thus creates an exclusively temporal medium in which the drama unfolds. If All That Fall disrupted the naturalism of radio drama by

³⁸³ Ibid., 204.

revealing that the sounds broadcast over the air do not convey action that is actually happening elsewhere, Embers attacks the physical space of the stage play and replaces it with an imagined space constructed by the voice.

In a way, the imaginative, indeterminate, interior medium that Embers constructs independently of space comes closer to replicating the atmosphere of the novel trilogy's first-person monologues than any of Beckett's other dramatic works, and he soon exploited this similarity by bringing the prose to the radio. Not long after Beckett wrote Embers, the BBC broadcast readings by the Irish actor, Patrick Magee, of two of Beckett's prose works: From an Abandoned Work and an excerpt from Molloy.³⁸⁴ This proved to be a pivotal moment in Beckett's career as a dramatist: he was so taken by Magee's readings of the prose as dramatic monologues that it spurred him to consider the possibilities of monologue for the theater, and he wrote Krapp's Last Tape in 1958 specifically to be performed by Magee. Clearly, though, it was Magee's voice on the radio—recorded and transmitted over the airwaves—that captured Beckett's attention, for Krapp's Last Tape is no conventional monologue for the stage: the mechanism of the tape recorder alienates the actor's voice from his body; and, although the play presents both body and voice to the audience simultaneously, it nonetheless presents them separately. Here, it is worth noting, as an aside, that Beckett wrote Krapp's Last Tape not only in the midst of his work with radio drama, but also immediately after he had finished the second of his two pantomimes, and we can read the play as an attempt to produce dramatic meaning through the opposition and conjunction of the (mostly) mute body on stage and his own disembodied voice emanating from a machine; indeed, the audience has to interpret the play based less on what the voice says than on how the actor responds to it.

³⁸⁴ Beckett wrote Embers in 1957, though the BBC did not produce it until 1959. The readings of From an Abandoned Work and Molloy were broadcast in December 1957.

Beckett's achievements from Embers remain present here as well, though, for the play's effect relies on the rapid, mechanical juxtaposition of disparate times for its evocation of interiority. As a play written for the stage, Krapp cannot do away with space entirely, as Embers does, but it circumscribes this space as much as possible, limiting the actor's movement to a small area of the stage delimited by a strong overhead light ("*Table and immediately adjacent area in strong white light. Rest of stage in darkness,*" the stage directions stipulate.³⁸⁵). The voice shares this space with the body—inasmuch as the voice can be said to possess extension in space—both in the sense that the machine is on the desk in the middle of the lit area, and also insofar as the younger Krapp would presumably have recorded the tape while sitting at that same desk. But, as in Embers, the drama unfolds not in this exterior space, but temporally, in the conjunction of disparate times, juxtaposed mechanically. For, whatever emotional force Krapp's Last Tape produces comes from the *temporal* distance of years and perspective that lies between the 69 year-old Krapp who sits on stage listening and the 39 year-old Krapp whose prerecorded voice spills forth from the tape recorder. Sometimes this temporal distance creates moments of high comedy, as when the 69 year-old has to pause the tape and consult the dictionary to look up words that the 39 year-old once knew; more often, the mood is one of *pathos*, as the sharp contrast between the 39 year-old's vivacious, optimistic voice and the 69 year-old's brooding, disappointed countenance reveals a dissatisfied, unfulfilled life. In both cases, the play produces its effects by separating the voice from the presence of the body and, thus, altering the voice's role in the production of the play's meaning.

Beckett's final two works for radio, the English Words and Music and the French Cascando, stem directly from Krapp's Last Tape, or from Marcel Mihalovici's operatic rendering

³⁸⁵ Samuel Beckett, Krapp's Last Tape, Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Vol. 3, 221. Krapp leaves this lit area only occasionally, and never when the tape recorder is running.

of the play, the creation of which embroiled Beckett in the conflict of how music and words might be made to work together in tandem. Knowlson suggests that this conflict inspired Beckett to write Words and Music,³⁸⁶ in which an old man, Croak, tries vainly to coax his two friends, Words and Music, to work together to jointly develop the theme, “love;” and Beckett would soon collaborate again with Mihalovici on Cascando, which assays this same conflict in a different way. Synthesizing these elements proves a difficult task, in Words and Music. At first, Words pleads with Music to be silent while he speaks. He eventually tries to appease Croak, though, going even so far as to feebly sing his lines—a somewhat half-hearted concession to Music—but this ends in a pitiable failure, which Music punctuates with an angry retort that reduces Words to the dejected sigh that closes the play. Here, as in All That Fall, the effect of foregrounding what is typically a background sound is primarily comic, and it demystifies the value of speech accordingly, reducing it to another sound that competes with music for preeminence within the play and ultimately loses. Words and Music’s counterpart, Cascando, tends more towards Embers’ abstraction, however. Here, words and music do not appear as sentient, competing characters susceptible to the coaxing and persuasion of a third character; they appear, rather, as two separate, wholly indifferent sounds that the Opener “opens” and “closes,” as one would flip a switch or turn a dial on a receiver. Whereas, in Words and Music, Words’ disquisition first on sloth and subsequently on love takes the form of a self-important, mock-academic treatise reminiscent of the beginning of Lucky’s rant in Godot, in Cascando, the words that are opened adhere to an even-paced, breathless rhythm and repetition that gives them a rigid, mechanical quality; whereas John Beckett’s score for Words and Music feels brash and ebullient, in accordance with the aim of creating a combative personality for Music, Mihalovici’s

³⁸⁶ Knowlson, 443.

Cascando score is more modern and abstract, calling to mind some of the sparser woodwind-and-string passages of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. The Opener himself seems to possess little more sentience than that required to open and close the two sounds. He insists, repeatedly, that he does no more than perform this external function, and that we are not privy to some inner drama:

They say, He opens nothing, he has nothing to open, it's in his head.

They don't see me, they don't see what I do, they don't see what I have, and they say, He opens nothing, he has nothing to open, it's in his head.

I don't protest any more, I don't say any more,

There is nothing in my head.

I don't answer any more.

I open and close.³⁸⁷

If Embers eschewed the sonic production of external space and exploited radio's lack of visual elements to create, instead, an unseen interior medium through which the drama unfolds, Cascando foregoes even this: words and music do not compete in a visible or visualizable space ("They don't see me, they don't see what I do, they don't see what I have"), nor in the Opener's mind, nor does he "protest," "say," or "answer" to those who say otherwise (though, the "any more" suggests that he once did).³⁸⁸ He opens and closes, without coaxing, without pleading, without justifying, without answering, without performing any significant ratiocinative activity whatsoever. His voice activates sounds according to the arbitrary logic of enumeration and combination—words, music, words and music together, repeat—rather than that of narrative or exposition. In this way, the Opener prefigures the spotlight that organizes and animates Play

³⁸⁷ Samuel Beckett, Cascando, Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Vol. 3, 346.

³⁸⁸ Neither Words and Music nor Cascando was produced or broadcast in stereo—though both were broadcast by the BBC Third Programme after it had adopted stereo production as a common practice—so both forego even the illusion of space and separation provided by stereophony.

(which Beckett began to compose mere months after completing Cascando) even more than he develops the figure of Krapp, who starts and stops the tape recorder: in Cascando, there is no *pathos*, no nostalgia or pain of remembrance, no introspection. Rather, the figure of the Opener transforms the function of the voice—already separated from the body and from any sense of physical presence in space—strips it of its privileged role in the production of dramatic sense or intelligibility, and reduces it to one more machine or device among the rest, one that may be dispensed with as easily as the rest. Thus, Beckett’s years of experimentation with the radio allowed him to test and demystify many of the constitutive elements of dramatic intelligibility, clearing the ground in anticipation of Film’s subsequent creation of a new intelligibility.

5.3 A NON-LITERARY PUBLIC (FINAL)

Beckett wrote his first play for television, “Eh Joe,” in 1965, shortly after completing Film, but he didn’t begin working extensively in the medium until a decade later, when, between 1975 and 1982, he wrote the remaining four teleplays: “Ghost Trio” (1975), “...but the clouds...” (1976), “Quad” (1981), and “Nacht und Träume” (1982). The intervening years witnessed a significant shift in Beckett’s approach to his dramatic works, however, a shift that manifested itself primarily in two separate but complementary ways. The first of these is his increased willingness to adapt his plays to different media. Considering how adamantly he had refused, in the ‘50s, to allow Godot to be adapted for radio, film, or television—All That Fall, as we’ve seen, stemmed directly from this refusal—this change of heart and policy merits a moment’s reflection. Having finally submitted, in 1961, to the BBC’s requests to televise Godot, he soon permitted a number of his stage plays and prose fiction works to be broadcast on the radio; he

allowed portions of others to be read and released on vinyl record;³⁸⁹ he collaborated with Mariu Karmitz on a film version of Jean-Marie Serreau's production of Comédie (the French translation of Play) in 1966; he allowed the BBC to film Play (1976), Not I (1977), and "Rockaby" (1982) for television, though he only permitted the latter two to be televised;³⁹⁰ and he personally adapted "Was Wo" (the German translation of his final stage play, "What Where") to be televised on the Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR) station in Stuttgart. Certainly, this newfound willingness to adapt his works across various media expresses a more open and flexible attitude toward his dramatic works, as a result of which he became more amenable to revising those works significantly, long after their publication; indeed, sometimes the adaptations even led Beckett to alter the published, "original" stage play, as in the case of "What Where," the stage production of which he revised after the fact to mirror more closely the televised "Was Wo." Consequently, it no longer makes sense to refer to the published version of "What Where" as the "original," nor to ascribe to that version the sense of priority and authenticity that accompanies that term, as the multiplication and revision of the work through adaptation disperses the sense of historical uniqueness—or "aura," as Benjamin would say—that would normally attach to the authoritative version of the work. Disseminating "Was Wo" by television—thereby allowing it to reach the viewer in his or her own living room—diminishes the play's aura still further by drastically reducing the distance separating the work from the viewer and, thus, increasing its exhibition value considerably. Among its numerous other effects, then, the adaptation of Beckett's stage works for release or broadcast on technologically reproducible media—radio, vinyl records, television, film—substituted, as Benjamin says, "*a mass existence for a unique existence*" and permitted the works "*to reach the recipient in his or*

³⁸⁹ Jack MacGowran's MacGowran Speaking Beckett LP was released in January 1966 by Claddagh Records.

³⁹⁰ Beckett's rejection of the BBC's Play in 1976 led him to write "...but the clouds..." to replace it.

her own situation,” destroying the works’ aura and, thus, fundamentally altering the conditions of their reception and the public that could receive them.

The other, equally significant manifestation of Beckett’s shifting attitude towards his dramatic works at this time is his decision to start directing his own plays, both on stage and for television. Although he had collaborated closely with directors during the ‘50s and early ‘60s, the 1966 SDR broadcast of “He, Joe” (the German translation of “Eh Joe”) marked his first solo venture in directing his own works; from that point onward through the mid-‘80s, he directed critically celebrated productions of his stage plays in London, Paris, and (especially) Berlin, as well as SDR broadcasts of all of his television plays (including the revised and adapted “Was Wo”). Here, as well, the process of directing the stage plays frequently led Beckett to revise them extensively, often altering them appreciably from their already-published (in many cases, already-canonical) forms and, thus, diminishing considerably the latter’s claims to priority, authenticity, and historical uniqueness.

If we locate the turning point in Beckett’s attitude in the mid-‘60s, beginning with his first work for television as well as his directorial debut (which coincided in the 1966 SDR broadcast of “He, Joe”), we cannot help but note that this shift occurs simultaneously with Beckett’s ascendance from startling overnight success and abstruse international phenomenon to the ranks of the Great Writers: 1964 saw the London production of Godot in which the play was received, as Martin Esslin recalls, no longer as an “incomprehensible avant-garde work,” but as a “modern classic” whose “meaning and symbolism were a little too obvious;”³⁹¹ in 1965, Esslin published Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, one of the first and most influential early anthologies of Beckett criticism, a volume whose very existence and historical necessity

³⁹¹ Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Overlook Press, 1973), ix.

indexed the moment at which scholarship on Beckett reached a saturation point and had to organize itself, as a field, to direct future scholarship; and in 1969, the Swedish Academy consecrated Beckett's entry into the pantheon by awarding him the Nobel Prize for literature. For a writer whose already-four-decades-long literary career had tirelessly assailed the received conventions of a literary tradition to which he had arrived too late, in the moment of its obsolescence, his institutionally sanctioned assimilation into that tradition could only be received as a disaster and a monumental misunderstanding: "Fame is a form of incomprehension," as Borges said, "perhaps the worst."³⁹² In the very moment of his canonization, then, Beckett's shifting treatment of his own works—his choice to adapt them to technologically reproducible media, to disseminate them not only in the West End and on Broadway (where they would have been commanding increasingly prohibitive ticket prices) but on the audience's radios, turntables, and television sets, and to destabilize the finality of the published versions through continuous revision in performance and adaptation—disrupted the authority, the historical uniqueness, and the cult-based reverence for the very works for which he was being canonized and summoned a public other than that which canonized him.

His extensive work with television during this period, therefore, may be seen not only as an elaboration of the visual aesthetic that he establishes with Film, but perhaps more significantly as his most radical excursion beyond literature into a medium whose public embodies the emerging material conditions of consciousness in a post-literary moment, an excursion whose necessity emerged as a direct consequence of Beckett's own canonization within the very tradition whose imminent obsolescence led him to declare an assault on words more than three decades earlier. Here, we find perhaps the fullest expression of Beckett's

³⁹² Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," Labyrinths, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. by James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 43.

fidelity to failure, as he refuses his own moment of victory, the official consecration of his mastery, and goes on assaying new forms towards the articulation of a new public.

6.0 CONCLUSION: IMAGINATION NOT DEAD YET

“No sign anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine.”

--Samuel Beckett, Imagination Dead Imagine³⁹³

Beckett’s 1969 induction into the pantheon of the literary tradition against which he had struggled for forty years undoubtedly constituted an egregious misapprehension of the nature of his literary innovations and the impetus that drove them: “*despite everything* they have given you the Nobel Prize,” Jérôme Lindon informed him by telegram, to which Beckett’s wife, Suzanne, replied, “Quelle catastrophe.”³⁹⁴ The Prize, awarded to Beckett “for his writing, which—in new forms for the novel and drama—in the destitution of modern man finds its elevation,”³⁹⁵ firmly assimilates his *oeuvre* back into the well-worn artist-occasion relation, back into the “plane of the feasible,” the “all known,” even as it suggests that the negativity of the effort to assay the “imagine later” nonetheless eventually “finds its elevation”—that is, its synthesis and transcendence—within these same works. If, in 1949, Beckett could say in the “Three Dialogues,” “I know that all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an

³⁹³ Samuel Beckett, Imagination Dead Imagine, 182.

³⁹⁴ Quoted in Ackerley and Gontarski, eds. The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett, 407, emphasis added.

³⁹⁵ “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1969.” Nobelprize.org. 3 Apr 2012.
http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates1969/

acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation,” then certainly, twenty years later, the reduction of his works to a dialectic of destitution and elevation corresponding to the condition of modern man who, despite his despair, nonetheless toils doggedly and is somehow redeemed in a nihilistic world devoid of God or reason could only be understood as an effort to bring these works to perhaps the most “acceptable conclusion” imaginable and, thus, consign them forever to “desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living.”

And yet, this colossal misunderstanding, this “catastrophe,” does not mark a final, conclusive failure that silences Beckett’s radical literary-aesthetic project and brings it, at last, to the point of “imagination dead;” rather, this catastrophe is itself indicative of the far-reaching transformation in historical modes of intelligibility and perception that Beckett’s works exhibit in their experimentation with language and technology, even if this transformation has only more recently become legible. Beckett himself once interpreted the incomprehension with which the “Ladies and Gentlemen” received Joyce’s Work in Progress as an indication of their cultural decadence and the looming obsolescence of the forms of intelligibility that grounded the literary public that they represented. In the same way, the manifest incongruity between the Nobel Prize, as one of the last remaining institutional refuges of the ideals of literary humanism, and Beckett’s sustained experimentation towards a poesis for a post-literary age—evident not only in his work with new technologies and media, but in his efforts to disarticulate the nexus of language, nation, and culture through the process of self-translation—reveals the extent to which the former has become antiquated and incapable of fully assimilating the latter into its ranks: “imagination not dead yet.” In the scene itself of the catastrophe—Beckett being rewarded for continuing and contributing to the long-standing literary tradition whose values and forms of intelligibility he

was at that very moment assailing in his experimentation with television and in the prose dyad, “Ping”/The Lost Ones—a dialectical image of historical transformation emerges, as the old order of intelligibility, exhausted, teetering to its ruin, is articulated simultaneously with the beginnings of a new order, echoing the same coarticulation of belatedness and beginnings that defines the historical consciousness that drives Beckett’s entire literary-aesthetic endeavor and its generative *ethos*: “imagination dead imagine.”

The continuing relevance of Beckett’s work—even after his enshrinement—across genres, languages, and media is everywhere visible today. Although radio’s significance, as a medium, has waned considerably since Beckett’s death in 1989 (to say nothing of its decline since his radio plays from the ‘50s and ‘60s), television and film have continued to displace literature’s formerly privileged role as the undisputed bearer of culture and the tradition. Even in literature, the break-up of the European empires, the dispersion of populations across the planet, and the concomitant emergence of post-colonial literatures and (subsequently) post-colonial literary studies have continued to disarticulate the nexus of language, nation, and culture that Beckett assayed perhaps most explicitly in “Ping” and The Lost Ones, wherein he separates language from the customs and institutions of culture belonging to particular peoples. While The Lost Ones presents these institutions in decline, infinitesimally approaching extinction in a cylinder that “depopulates,” “Ping” assays the formation of a literary language that can no longer articulate the consciousness of a nation or a people. And yet, the mechanical-sounding “ping” that punctuates the work at irregular intervals begins, through repetition with incremental variation, to act as a tag or linguistic marker that drives language in the direction of a coding or markup language, in which words serve no semantic function, but nonetheless determine the protocols by which the text will appear to the reader; so that, in a way, J.M. Coetzee’s doctoral

dissertation on Beckett in 1969—in which the former programmer subjects Beckett’s prose to a computer-based stylistic analysis—was perhaps not so misguided after all; and, what is more, Coetzee’s inter-continental life itinerary (spanning Africa, Europe, North America, and now Australia) outstrips Beckett’s own perspective (which is almost exclusively European) by far, such that Coetzee may well provide a fitting example of the “international phenomenon” that Beckett imagined decades earlier.

And yet, here we go again, reading Beckett among Nobel laureates, amid the pantheon, making of his legacy “a new occasion, a new term of relation” within the history of literature. Reading the transformation that Beckett’s *oeuvre* indexes and elaborating the works in their after-life without making of them the latest development within that history remains the challenge for criticism that would faithfully assay these works in accordance with the *ethos* of fidelity to failure.

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